The Mobile Register
The First 100 Years
The Business of Newspapering and Politics in the 19th Century
By Ralph E. Poore
THE MOBILE REGISTER: THE FIRST 100 YEARS.
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Cover photo: The Mobile Register building located at the corner of Royal and St. Michael streets. It was probably taken between 1884 and 1888. Courtesy of the Historic Mobile Preservation Society.
# Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: *News for an Expanding Nation* .......................... 1

CHAPTER 2 *A Press for Party and Section* .......................... 23

CHAPTER 3 *Depression and Turmoil* ............................... 40

CHAPTER 4 *Prosperity and the Growth of News* ............... 67

CHAPTER 5 *Deadline for Disunion* ................................. 89

CHAPTER 6 *Reporting the Civil War* ............................... 113

CHAPTER 7 *Resisting Reconstruction* ............................. 133

CHAPTER 8 *Struggle for Survival* ................................. 165

CHAPTER 9 *Shift to a New Journalism* ............................ 196

CHAPTER 10 *Decades of Sensation* ................................. 221

CONCLUSION *The Business of Newspapering* .................... 256

Acknowledgments .......................................................... 269

About the Author .......................................................... 270

Also by Ralph E. Poore ................................................. 271
Preface

I love gaining knowledge from reading stories about the past. Acquiring knowledge doesn’t give me any particular power except to understand why people behave as they do and why events unfold as they do. The result is invaluable insights into the present.

When published histories don’t tell me everything I want to know or if no history exists, I start ferreting out the facts for myself. That’s how I came to write this history of the Mobile Register. I couldn’t find out what I wanted to know from published histories and wanted to know more.

I am a trained historian, but I don’t like much of what passes for history, especially Southern history. Whether in journals or books, a lot of history is written so badly that it is hard to read, let alone understand. Sometimes it seems as though the author made his work hard to understand on purpose.

Journalism history is no better. When historians don’t skip Southern newspapers altogether, they select only those that illustrate conventional historical wisdom. Or worse, the historians, who are overwhelmingly liberal, pick only newspaper examples that serve their politically correct agenda. They often interpret history in Marxist terms, seeing only exploitation.

I especially don’t like how history is presented in academic journals. These journals don’t allow for reader responses. You will not find a “letters to the editor” section in them and, in fact, they don’t want feedback. Even if a journal allows you to make a response, it will be months before it is published. A response from the author is unlikely. Established historians have a vested interest in protecting their views of the past and they
and their supporters will circle the wagons to defend them against challengers.

The internet has changed the writing of history in almost the same way as it has changed journalism, at one time called the first rough draft of history. A few of the changes include:

- **The rise of the amateur:** In the past, finding and accessing sources often required travel to widely scattered libraries and archives. Using them required plentiful resources of both time and money, often in the form of government grants that went only to established academic researchers, so-called professional historians. Today, more and more records are available online to researchers. Those records not already online can be requested from the holder online and delivered in a digital format. This opens research to anyone with the desire and talent to do so.

- **Everyone is a publisher now:** In the past if a historian’s work didn’t reach the desired audience, that wasn’t the historian’s problem. Historians researched and wrote. Publishers published. Now it is important for the historian to be where the readers are and not the other way around. Anyone with a website, blog, or Facebook page can begin publishing history. Anyone with an Amazon.com account can upload a history ebook and have it published within a few hours.

- **A switch from lecture to conversation:** Previously, the production of history and journalism flowed in one direction, from writer
to reader. Now, readers expect to be involved. They are knowledgeable and understand how to check facts as well as anyone. Because everything online is connected, holes in a history story are quickly spotted. The internet provides a place for instant collaboration, feedback, and correction. My blog, Newspapering, provides a place to find more stories and to discuss my work.

Many old-line historians have yet to recognize how these changes have shifted control of writing history from academics to the people formerly known as the audience. The Mobile Register: the First 100 Years is, in part, an attempt to show other talented scribblers how to use this power.

The more I research local history, the more I'm convinced that many of the grand narratives of history are wrong, or at least provide a distorted view. The local facts just don't match the big interpretations. I've come not to trust any sweeping histories to provide an accurate picture of the past. In researching the history of the Press Register, I was unable to reconcile many aspects of the newspaper’s history with the grand narratives of journalism history.

The newspaper in the Early Republic years, for example, just didn't fit those narratives and neither did its competitors. For example, there were no neat divisions between commercial and political journals. There were no sharp lines marking changes from one era to another.

The Register like other papers, had been neutral or non-partisan until the Second American Party System.
Although it became a Democrat paper, it also was independent, sometimes cooperating with the local opposition Whigs and sometimes opposing them.

Although the Register wasn’t a penny paper, it also made many of the innovations often attributed to New York’s penny papers of the 1830s. Historians have overlooked the simple fact that Mobile and other newspapers along the Gulf Coast couldn’t literally be penny papers. The smallest coin in circulation at the time was the picayune, worth about 6 ¼ cents. There were no pennies with which to buy a paper.

One purpose of this work is to add to the historical record as well as to correct misperceptions. *The Mobile Register: The First 100 Years* adds a lot of detail Mobile’s history as seen from inside the newspaper’s office. Another purpose is to show how to write history in plain language, writing that can be easily understood the first time it is read and that also is interesting to read. Historical writing doesn’t have to be dense and hard to read.

Most of all *The Mobile Register: The First 100 Years* is the story of the people who produced it. During the 19th century especially, those individuals had a highly personal connection with the affairs of their community. If you wanted to know what was going on in Mobile or wanted to let the town know about an activity, you went to the newspaper office. No wonder, then, that newspaper men, and a few women, were leaders in civic affairs. *The Mobile Register: The First 100 Years* is written to show that central organizing role played by the people of the newspaper.
Introduction

“Nothing,” journalist G. K. Chesterton wrote, “looks more neat and regular than a newspaper with its parallel columns, its mechanical printing, its detailed facts and figures, its responsible, polysyllabic leading articles. Nothing, as a matter of fact, goes every day through more agonies of adventure, more hairbreadth escapes, desperate expedients, crucial councils, random compromises, or barely averted catastrophes. Seen from the outside, it seems to come round as automatically as the clock and as silently as the dawn. Seen from the inside, it gives all its organizers a gasp of relief every day to see it come out at all.”

I didn’t discover Chesterton’s observation until several years into my career as a working journalist. I had entered newspapering with a relatively fresh master’s degree, an attitude of superiority, and a quixotic view of journalism.

Time and experience disabused me of my arrogance and unrealistic expectations. I came to realize that Chesterton’s words aptly described the reality of newspapering that I had come to know. Newspapering was a messy business. Seen from the inside, nothing about it was neat or regular.

Far from being disillusioned, I was intrigued. Chesterton’s insight helped me start taking an honest look at the newspaper as it existed, not as the antiseptic journalism lab I had expected from my textbooks.

The more flawed personalities, oddballs, and

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imperfect characters I encountered, the more interesting and realistic the newspaper appeared. Many masks of journalistic respectability hid imperfect souls as well as a few corrupt and dishonorable personalities.

The history of a newspaper is the story of the people who put it out. The reporters, editors, and publishers of the Mobile Press Register have been active leaders in the city’s political, social, cultural, religious, economic, and intellectual affairs. Their personal values, politics, ambitions, and family connections have shaped the development of the city and the newspaper.

Historians too often ignore this active role of newspapermen in the affairs of their city. In doing so, they present an incomplete picture of the forces at work in urban life and decision making. The only active role newspapermen are usually given is as observers and recorders of current events. Occasionally, in such depictions, they lend their words to editorial crusades for reform. But newspapermen were as likely to wield the sword of action as the pen of observation.

The history of a newspaper is also, if not primarily, that of a business following its self-interest for survival in a competitive marketplace. The grandest expression of that self-interest is the protection of the First Amendment right of freedom of the press, the constitutionally guaranteed reason for a newspaper’s existence. In this role, the newspaper protects all the other constitutional liberties of the American people.

That is the image of the ideal which rests largely on the 20th century concept that newspapers should be as objective as possible in reporting the news. That is the image journalists and journalism historians most often project for the profession. And it is the image that
publishers enthusiastically promote because it endows every endeavor of the newspaper with a quality higher than mere self-interest.

But the business of newspapering takes place in a competitive market place whose realities often seem too compromising for journalism’s idealists. The business interests of the newspaper are often defined by the business and personal interests of the owner or publisher. The publisher may have numerous other business interests, political ambitions, or family connections that color how the newspaper covers the news.

That’s the real world of journalism as seen from the inside. Far from tarnishing the image of newspapers in our society, an understanding of how they really operated ought to enhance our sympathies for how they wrestled with the competing demands made on them. The Constitution, the marketplace, politics, and other forces pulled newspapermen and women in many directions.

Because a newspaper covers so much, and a newspaper that began in the early 1800s has covered a great deal, a great deal has had to be omitted. Those looking for a history of the editorial pages or of the biggest stories of each year would do well to look elsewhere. Much of that can be found here, but only as it serves to illuminate the operation of the newspaper.

I began researching and writing the history of newspaper in the 1980s and printed a manuscript copy for several libraries in 1992. There the project sat until the early 2000s. By then, the internet had made it possible to easily to find and mine other resources not readily available before. In addition, the Press Register
and newspapers in general were getting attention from a new group of scholars. Also, the dramatic decline of newspapers after 1995 illuminated many issues not easily seen before.

Given this new state of affairs I decided to revisit and revise my original manuscript. I’ve split the original into two parts. This first part covers the 100 years from about 1813 to 1910.

In 1910, the *Register* became a part of chain of newspapers for the first time, though that event hasn’t been recognized. It marked the newspaper coming of age as a big business, a process that had begun in the 1890s.

The second 100 years of the newspaper is covered in *Power Shifts*.

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**How sources are cited**

I have adopted the *New York Times* Index method of citation for newspaper articles. That is, a newspaper article citation includes the name of the paper followed by the date of publication, the section of the paper, the page number, and the column number. The sections are separated by a comma from the page number. The page number is separated by a colon from the column number. If there is only one section to the paper, only the page and column number are given. For example: *Mobile Press* April 15, 1980 B,2:1. This allows researchers to locate a citation quickly and easily in the newspaper.

This method sometimes breaks down, particularly for the mid-1800s and during the Civil War when only parts of the paper survive. With only two or three
columns of a page surviving, it is sometimes impossible to tell which page and columns they are.

During other periods, the newspaper didn’t number its pages or it numbered the pages separately in sections, but didn’t number or letter the sections. Sometimes the sections were given names instead of numbers or letters.

Furthermore, modern newspapers using computer-aided design often created page designs that crossed and defied conventional columns. In such cases, I retained the New York Times method, assigning a column number that seems most logical for that page. Although somewhat arbitrary, it is logical as a reader looks at the page. To shorten the citations, I used the following conventions for the footnotes:

DR: Daily Register
HA&R: Mobile Advertiser & Register
MCR: Mobile Commercial Register
MCR&P: Mobile Commercial Register & Patriot
MDA: Mobile Daily Advertiser
MDA&R: Mobile Daily Advertiser & Register
MDCR&P: Mobile Daily Commercial Register & Patriot
MDN: Mobile Daily News
MDR: Mobile Daily Register
MEN: Mobile Evening News
MG&CA: Mobile Gazette & Commercial Advertiser
MG&GA: Mobile Gazette & General Advertiser
MMAdv: Mobile Mercantile Advertiser
MPR: Mobile Press Register
MR: Mobile Register
MR&A: Mobile Register & Advertiser
MR&J: Mobile Register & Journal
MWA: Mobile Weekly Advertiser
MMA: Mobile Municipal Archives
HMPS: Historic Mobile Preservation Society
MPL: Mobile Public Library Local History and Genealogy Division
CHAPTER 1:  
*News for an Expanding Nation*

One of the greatest migrations in the history of the Western world swept up farmers, merchants, and adventurers in Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and elsewhere after 1812 and deposited them in Alabama. Successive waves of American migrants had begun pushing into the lands of the New South, especially the Alabama country, made available immediately after the War of 1812.

One planter described how rapidly the inhabitants of the Old South became infected with the fever to move: “The Alabama Feaver rages here with great violence and has carried off vast numbers of our Citizens. I am apprehensive, if it continues to spread as it has done, it will almost depopulate the country. There is no question that this feaver is contagious … for as soon as one neighbour visits another who has just returned from the Alabama he immediately discovers the same symptoms which exhibited by the person who has seen the allureing Alabama. Some of our oldest and most wealthy men are offering their possessions
for sale and desirous of removing to this new country.”

Large-scale settlement into Alabama became possible because of Andrew Jackson’s victory over the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend. This decisive battle had broken organized Indian resistance while Jackson’s skills around the conference table also had freed a large section of the new American southwest from Indian claims.

Jackson’s successes made it possible for families to move into the new lands. But the energizing force for pulling up roots and beginning life anew on the frontier was the enlarged prospect for creating wealth through commercial agriculture, particularly cotton production.

The Treaty of Ghent signed in December 1814 ending the war between the United States and Great Britain had reopened European trade. The expansion of the British textile industry brought an enormous demand for cotton. The price of cotton doubled in slightly more than a year to reach 32½ cents a pound by June 1815.

Although cotton production also increased dramatically to meet the demand, it still brought 24 cents a pound through 1819. The lands of the Old South, Virginia and parts of the Carolinas and Georgia, were worn out. The lands of the New South were fertile and

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available almost for the asking.³

Settlers moved into these resource regions of a nation in the building. The regions vibrated to the rhythm of the great urban markets of the Northeastern United States and of Europe to supply the agricultural products demanded by great enterprises.

Americans moving to these new lands needed practical information to guide them to fertile lands, timber, water, and markets. They had a ravenous hunger for information.

Not surprisingly then, among the settlers who pushed into the Alabama territory were those who hauled and shoved and toted printing presses and cases of type. They traveled along roads that were barely more than wide ruts, across unbridged streams, and down unfamiliar rivers.

Frontier printers intended to use their presses to help them make money. After the American Revolution, printers opened new paths to do that. Most took the commercial path, printing billheads, receipts, circulars, insurance policies, handbills, posters, books, pamphlets, and all the other forms of paperwork needed in business and social affairs.

Other printers took the newspaper publishing path. The newspaper business in turn branched off in different directions. Some newspaper operators traveled down a traditional road of serving up foreign and commercial news to merchants. Other newspaper publishers became political leaders using their papers and influence to

direct the affairs of parties and factions of parties.

Rarely on the frontier were newspaper operators solely one thing or the other. All of them did commercial printing because it brought people into the business office with news for their papers’ columns, and it brought in money. Early newspapers operated on tiny profits, if they made any money at all. Two out of every three American newspapers started before 1821 lasted only three years or less. Commercial printing and the newspaper brought people in for the other services and products the operator offered.⁴

All of the newspapers could lay claim to publishing some commercial or political news. As the frontier became more settled and competitors entered the market, newspaper operators often changed the character of their journals.

For at least the first 50 years of the 1800s and perhaps longer, the markets for frontier newspapers, just like those of their region’s farms, were the distant cities. Southern frontier newspapers told urban manufacturers, increasingly British textile mills consuming Southern cotton, the size and quality of the crops they could expect.

The newspapers alerted middle men—factors, bankers, shippers, warehousemen, and others—to the steps they needed to take. Frontier plantation patrons read in their papers what prices they could expect from the various distant markets, what services were available to handle their products, and how much it would cost.

The dark, fertile soil of the south-central region of Alabama known as the Black Belt particularly attracted cotton planters seeking new land. Through this region ran many of the territory’s navigable rivers before they converged and flowed past Mobile, the territory’s lone seaport and only town of any size. Sitting at the mouth of Alabama’s river system, the port would service much of the interior from foreign markets and supply foreign markets from the interior. Here would be the interchange point.

Samuel Miller and John B. Hood early recognized this and in 1811 hauled a printing outfit overland from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Mims’ Ferry on the Alabama River about 45 miles north of the port. There they loaded their equipment aboard a boat and took it to Fort Stoddert, the southernmost U.S. military and customs outpost in the Alabama territory.

The United States and Spain disputed possession of Mobile. So from Fort Stoddert on May 23, 1811, Miller and Hood issued the Mobile Centinel, the first newspaper in what became the state of Alabama. The four-page, four-column weekly ceased publication in June 1812, 10 months before the Americans took possession of Mobile.5

General James Wilkinson, commander of American

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forces, had barely evicted the Spanish from the town when James Lyon moved in with his printing equipment and began publication of the *Mobile Gazette*.6

In 1799, Lyon had published a campaign newspaper in Georgetown, Virginia, in support of Thomas Jefferson. With Jefferson’s election as president, Lyon moved to Washington and became public printer to Congress.

After the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn sent Lyon to Baton Rouge with orders for Wilkinson to take possession of New Orleans. Lyon followed the American flag to New Orleans, obtained a printing press, and published the first American newspaper there.

A man with big ambitions, Lyon moved from New Orleans to Carthage, Tennessee, to publish a newspaper before coming to Mobile in 1813. He didn’t remain long. Lyon by 1816 had sold the *Mobile Gazette* and moved on to found more frontier newspapers.

A congressional act of 1814 providing for the printing of federal laws in three newspapers in each state and territory perhaps encouraged his becoming the Johnny Appleseed of newspapers. Lyon had the political

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connections to get named the printer of federal laws.\textsuperscript{7}

Many Americans intent on financial gain searched for the next boomtown and the commercial possibilities of the Mobile port attracted other frontier newspapermen. Two of them founded the \textit{Mobile Commercial Advertiser} in March 1819.

The town was still too small, however, to support two newspapers. In 1820, Mobile County had a total population of only 2,672 people, and 836 of those were slaves. Within a month, the \textit{Advertiser\textapos;s} owners sold out to the \textit{Gazette}, which changed its name to the \textit{Mobile Gazette & Commercial Advertiser}.\textsuperscript{8}

Such rapid changes in newspaper ownership occurred because these early printers followed the frontier. They made their living off coming into a new territory with a shirttail full of type and setting up newspapers and printing services. If they found competitors already too well established to share the market, they would likely sell out and move westward again with the frontier.

Not until cotton began to pour into the city from plantations and farms recently settled in the Alabama interior did Mobile begin to attract the kind of newspapermen who were solid businessmen and builders. Two such were Jonathan Battelle and John W. Townsend.


\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Mobile Gazette & Commercial Advertiser} changed its name July 27, 1820 to \textit{Mobile Gazette & General Advertiser}.
Jonathan and his older brother, Nathaniel, tired of being merchants in Savannah and decided to move to Alabama shortly after it became a state to try their hand at city building. They bought stock in the Alabama Company of South Carolina, which had acquired tens of thousands of acres in the region of Montgomery and was encouraging settlers. Nathaniel moved to Montgomery to look after his and his brother’s interests and to help in the laying out of the new town.  

Jonathan, meanwhile, remained in Savannah and ordered printing equipment from the North shipped to the Georgia port. He began placing ads in the Mobile Gazette in the summer of 1820 announcing his intentions to start a newspaper in Montgomery to be called the Republican and asking for subscribers.

After the equipment arrived in Savannah, Jonathan had it hauled the 400 miles overland to Montgomery, and in January 1821 the two Battelle brothers published the first edition of the Republican. Discontented with opportunities in Montgomery, however, Jonathan spent part of the summer and fall of 1821 preparing to come to Mobile and to start another newspaper, the Mobile Commercial Register, in partnership with John W. Townsend.  

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The men had decided to embark into publishing the Register, as they explained in the first issue of December 10, 1821, because of: “The rising importance of the State of Alabama; its progress in wealth and respectability, in which its sea ports so largely participate its consequent increasing weight in the great national scale.” Unspoken, but also anticipated, was the hope that the newspaper would aid the men in accumulating wealth from their other business interests, especially real estate speculation.\textsuperscript{11}

To raise the cash they needed to operate the Register, Battelle and Townsend had begun a subscription drive by advertising a prospectus in the newspapers around the country. The prospectus outlined the intention to publish a paper, the days of publication, the cost of subscriptions and ads, and identified the owners.

Subscriptions represented a contract between the operators and the subscribers. The operators obligated themselves to fulfill the promises in the prospectus and the subscribers’ patronage implied a commitment to support the paper by also taking out advertising or job printing.\textsuperscript{12}

A subscription to the Register, $8 a year, cost about twice as much as papers in the East. That also was higher than some other Southern papers, such as the Richmond Enquirer, whose subscription cost $5 a year.

\textsuperscript{11} MCR December 10, 1821 1:1.
\textsuperscript{12} For examples of a prospectus see MCR June 15, 1830 4:3; MG\&CA January 5, 1820 3:2; MCR\&P February 18, 1833 3:1; Carolyn S. Dyer, “Economic Dependence and Concentration of Ownership Among Antebellum Wisconsin Newspapers,” Journalism History 7:2 (Summer 1980) 42-43.
“Terms of subscription are sometimes complained of in this country,” Battelle and Townsend said in October 1822. But they claimed an Alabama paper has as much reading matter as three or four large city dailies, by which they meant ads took up more space on the big dailies’ pages.

“There every thing is cheap; here, every thing is dear,” the editors said. Obtaining equipment and paper, often in short supply, was expensive. The editors also noted the difficulty they had with subscriptions compared to the big city dailies. “They have ten subscribers; we have one. There they are paid in advance, in this state, we are fortunate if paid at all.”

Battelle and Townsend were under no illusions as to hurdles they faced to publish a paper in Mobile. The editors said, “that the peculiar situation of the place, with but a thin country population, and its occasional liability to summer sickness, precludes the possibility of their realizing a very profitable patronage, particularly of subscription.”

A transient and fluctuating population presented tough local circulation problems. The city’s population during the fall and winter swelled as the year’s cotton crop moved through the port followed by planters, merchants, seamen, artists, gamblers, and adventurers. In the late spring and summer, the harbor stood nearly empty and the city’s population fell by about half. This was especially true during the 1820s and ’30s, but less so

14 MCR February 7, 1822 3:1.
The fear of yellow fever epidemics heightened the drop in the summer population when those who could left town. Some moved to the higher region of Spring Hill to the west of the city, some to the interior, and some to the North.

When yellow fever struck in the summer 1825, the mayor’s office, the bank, the post office, and the customs house all moved their offices outside the city. The *Register* operations and about 200 permanent residents remained in the town, which then had a winter population of about 3,000. In the yellow fever epidemic that struck in August 1826, the *Register* joined the public offices in relocating temporarily to Spring Hill.

With the population scattered for the summer or businesses shut down during epidemics, the *Register*’s carriers couldn’t deliver the papers to subscribers at their stores and homes. The paper asked subscribers to pick up their papers at the *Register* office. Sometimes the post office delivered the newspapers to city subscribers, if carriers were unable to do so.

In 1829, a disease other than yellow fever hindered the delivery of the newspaper. Measles struck four of the hands at the newspaper including the foreman and the principal carrier. “We are therefore under the necessity of craving the indulgence of our city subscribers this morning, as it will be utterly impossible to distribute our

15 *MCR* September 13, 1825 2:1; October 25, 1825 2:1; August 9, 1826 2:1; October 10, 1826 2:1.

16 *MCR* September 13, 1825 2:1; October 25, 1825 2:1; August 9, 1826 2:1; October 10, 1826 2:1.

17 *MCR* Aug. 9, 1826 2:1; Aug. 9, 1825 2:1.
papers,” the editor wrote.\textsuperscript{18}

Circulation of the paper was small. In the 1820s, the paper printed about 900 copies. That compares well with the \textit{Richmond Whig}, which had a circulation of 275 in 1824, and the older, twice-weekly \textit{Richmond Enquirer} with a circulation of 1,500. The nation’s dailies averaged about 1,000 circulation. Until 1833, the largest paper in the country, the \textit{New York Courier and Enquirer}, had a circulation of only 4,500.

The \textit{Register} editors forbade newspaper carriers to sell copies of the paper on the street or to deliver them to anyone other than regular subscribers. Carriers didn’t conduct individual street sales at the time. Readers could only purchase the paper by subscription. Every copy of the newspaper that didn’t go to a paying subscriber represented a loss at a time when subscriptions paid a greater share of costs than did advertising.\textsuperscript{19}

There were several reasons to favor subscriptions over street sales. The \textit{Register} needed the steady support provided by subscriptions. Editors didn’t expect men on the street to casually hand over hard currency for the newspaper. Hard coin, in fact, was hard to come by. There was always a shortage of circulating money on the frontier.

The \textit{Register} complained in one edition that several persons who had not subscribed were taking copies of the paper. The newspaper threatened to prosecute the offenders “for the petty swindling.” The editors offered to give a paper to anyone who could not afford to

\textsuperscript{18} MCR April 17, 1829 2: 2.
\textsuperscript{19} MDCR&\textit{P} July 14, 1840 2:2; Ambler, \textit{Ritchie}, 7, 19.
subscribe, provided he had another city’s paper to trade. Subscribers could obtain an extra copy or two to forward on ships “unless at times when they may be unusually scarce with us.” The Register provided ship masters with free papers because the sailors usually exchanged papers from the previous port of call, giving the editors an important source of news from elsewhere.\(^{20}\)

Like subscriptions, advertising in the Register cost more than for Eastern newspapers. For most of the antebellum period, the newspaper charged $1 a square, about one column-inch, for the first time the ad ran. For the second time, the price dropped to 50 cents a square.

Large advertisers, those buying from $50 to several hundred dollars of space, could get discounts ranging from 10 percent up to 50 percent. Any standing ad of one square that required no changes could be contracted by the year for $40. One square of advertising in Mobile cost about one-third more than ads in Eastern newspapers.\(^{21}\)

The Register editors defended the higher costs, asserting that advertisers got more for their money in Mobile. “We have often heard people say ‘Advertising is very high in this country,’ when, in truth, it is cheaper than in the large commercial cities,” the Register explained in 1822. For the cost of three or four lines in the big cities, the newspaper claimed, an advertiser in the Register received 15 lines. Every advertiser also got a

\(^{20}\) MCR Oct. 24, 1822 2:3.

\(^{21}\) Mott, American Journalism, 201-202; MCR December 17, 1821 2:6; MDCR&P October 30, 1839 2:1.
mention in the editorial column of the Register.22

Nearly everything on the frontier was in short supply, raising prices. The shortage of cash in Alabama forced the newspaper to adopt a system of credit that often brought it grief. Ads ran continuously unless the advertiser told the editor to stop. Advertisers were supposed to pay at the end of the ad’s run.

Submitting an ad without a time limitation constituted signing a long-term contract. Some advertisers learned that it was no hardship on them to have ads run continuously without paying for them.23

The newspaper made frequent calls on its subscribers and advertisers to pay what they owed. So frequently, in fact, that patrons often didn’t take the demands seriously. “Lest our patrons should suspect it to be the case with us,” the Register said, “we assure them, ‘in right good earnest,’ that we are really in want of funds.”24

Battelle and Townsend had to do some close calculating in order to show a profit. Their books often indicated that their profit should be handsome. But that was on paper. The system of credit made necessary by the shortage of cash, the scattered and transient population, and the inability to collect unpaid debts often changed the ink from black to red.

In the 1820s, the twice-weekly Register had expenses of about $4,000 a year. Subscriptions brought in about $7,000 and advertising about $1,000 or less. That

23 MCR&P May 1, 1834 2:1; MDCR&P June 3, 1836 1:1.
24 MCR August 22, 1822 3:3.
THE MOBILE REGISTER: THE FIRST 100 YEARS

included amounts paid, or promised.\textsuperscript{25}  

The \textit{Register} generated revenue from many sources. Public offices often directed business to newspapers, officials favoring friendly editors. For example, the Mobile city government licensed auctioneers, unlike regular merchant trade. The newspaper editor with the most political influence at City Hall usually obtained the profitable auction-room advertising.\textsuperscript{26}  

Alabama at first did not require sheriffs, coroners, and constables to publicly advertise property for sale taken under court order. The \textit{Register} early asked the Legislature to adopt such a law for the state. “Some may say that such a measure would benefit us. We admit the fact,” the paper said, but pointed out that advertising’ property to be sold also would benefit the state by selling it at the highest bid.\textsuperscript{27}  

Major revenue came from job printing. The job office printed bill heads, bills of lading, checks, dray receipts, tickets, circulars, cards, notes, insurance policies, labels, handbills, posters, wedding invitations, books, pamphlets, and all the other forms of paperwork needed in business and social affairs. During election campaigns, the presses ran almost constantly to print campaign materials. For lawyers, the job shop published

\textsuperscript{25} MCR October 24, 1822 2:4.  
\textsuperscript{26} Frank Presbrey, \textit{The History and Development of Advertising}. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), 178; MMA, Box I, Env. 6, Folder 2, Doc. 110; City Directory 1842, 64.  
\textsuperscript{27} MCR December 23, 1822 2:1.
and sold a digest of city ordinances.\textsuperscript{28}

Naturally, then, many activities of the community centered on the newspaper office as a communications hub. Masters arranged to hire out their slaves through clearinghouses set up in the paper’s office. Citizens left petitions to the Legislature for changes in the law at the office for voters to sign.\textsuperscript{29}

From the earliest days of the town, businessmen needed a place to gather to smoke and exchange news of ship sailings, cargoes, and distant markets. At first, hotel lobbies, the post office, and saloons filled the need. Newspaper operators, however, soon began to provide more pleasant and exclusive quarters through reading rooms.

The \textit{Register} opened its reading room by starting a subscription drive. For about $10 a year, the newspaper supplied businessmen with newspapers from around the country and from abroad, as well as maps, charts, periodicals, books, shipping lists, and prices current, or market reports, from the principal markets. Furniture and tables provided businessmen a comfortable place to examine the materials. When gas lights came to Mobile, reading rooms were the first to get illuminated.\textsuperscript{30}

The reading room served an important purpose for

\textsuperscript{28} MDR September 13, 1855 4:6; MCR November 14, 1822 3:4; MCR&P August 4, 1834 2:1; MCR February 4, 1822 4:6; February 7, 1822 1:3.


\textsuperscript{30} MCR December 17, 1821 3:2; MDCR&P December 12, 1835 2:1; MCR December 30, 1835 2:1.
THE MOBILE REGISTER: THE FIRST 100 YEARS

the newspaper: the gathering of the latest commercial news. That is why the newspaper granted masters of vessels calling at the port and out-of-town friends of merchant subscribers free admission to the room.31

The Register didn’t need and couldn’t afford a staff of reporters to fill the two or three columns in its four pages available for news. A reporter, called the “news collector,” visited the ships in port and got from their clerks the manifests, exports, arrivals, and departures. Editors considered little else of local happening of value to their readers worth inserting into the news columns.32

The most significant source of news came from the exchanges, news gleaned mostly from the Eastern newspapers that arrived by the latest mail. The Register, like most other newspapers, depended on its exchanges for important information from the economic and political centers of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, and the major cities of Europe.

Often derided as “scissors and pastepot journalism,” this highly organized system of gathering news had its own set of rules and understandings among editors. One of those understandings was that editors were to give credit to the source newspapers.

When the editor of the St. Stephens Halcyon violated that rule, the Register chided that, “To the Halcyon, our debt of gratitude is easily paid—the only notice it has condescended to take of us, is to copy about a column and a half from us, without giving the usual credit.” The Register complained that it took two days’ labor to collect the information from about 300 pages and arrange the

32 MDCR&P January 13, 1836 2:2; MCR December 10, 1821 3:2.
News gathered through the mail exchanges had an important influence on weaving the Alabama frontier into the nation. Newspapers linked small places such as Mobile with the political and financial decisions made in New York, Boston, and Washington. The frontier depended on the Eastern commercial centers as sources of manufactured goods and as markets for its agricultural products.

The interior of the state depended on the national government to protect settlements from Indian attacks and wanted it to make internal improvements. As a port city, Mobile depended on the Navy to keep the Gulf of Mexico safe for shipping. “Scarcely a mail or a vessel arrives without furnishing an account of some new piracy,” the Register reported in alerting merchants and the Navy.34

Through its commercial news, the Register gave Eastern merchants some idea of the size and quality of cotton crops, the rates of exchange for currency, and the general outlook on investments. The East eagerly awaited such news. The New York National Advocate, for example, complained in February 1822 that it still hadn’t received the Register’s first issue.35

“We regret the non arrival of our first number at that city,” the Register responded, “as we bestowed considerable industry upon it, in order to give our New-

33 MCR December 27, 1821 3:1; MDCR&P July 20, 1838 2:1.
35 MCR February 14, 1822 3:2.
York and other friends some particulars, which they had solicited, and said they had not been able to obtain regularly.”

Mail failures, however, made regularity of receiving information nearly impossible. “It is unpleasant to be under the necessity of recording so many Mail failures—The Eastern Mail which was due yesterday, has not arrived,” the Register typically complained throughout the 1820s.

The newspaper sought early to deal with the poor mail service. The editors in 1822 called a meeting in the Commercial News Room of one of the town’s hotels to adopt “suitable measures to remedy the present injurious defects in the Western Mail arrangement.”

Stages carried the mails over the main roads in Alabama, when it didn’t rain. Otherwise, a horseback rider carried them. The mail stages, operated by private contractors, carried passengers as well as mail. Since carrying passengers was more profitable than carrying mail, the contractors sometimes laid the mail on the side of the road to make room for more passengers.

Being a port city, Mobile also received mail by boat from upriver cities such as Montgomery and from other Gulf Coast ports such as New Orleans. Newspaper subscribers in New Orleans had their papers sent by private packets, which delivered the papers to the post office.

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36 MCR February 14, 1822 3:2.
37 MCR December 27, 1821 3:1.
38 MCR Feb. 4, 1822 3:2.
Heavy rains often flooded the many streams and creeks surrounding the Mobile area, preventing mail delivery. In April 1822, the Register said the city had received no Northern or Eastern mails for a week. “We understand the high waters have rendered the roads utterly impassable.”

Disreputable cotton speculators sometimes had the mails misdirected so that they could take advantage of changes in the market by withholding news of the changes from distant places. Merchants who met in May 1825 to determine why the Eastern mails weren’t being received, for example, charged the failure “was owing to improper interference of speculators.” The men put up a $1,000 reward for information leading to the capture and conviction of the culprits and also sent two of their members to Washington, D.C., to ask the postmaster general to investigate.

Mail service improved some over the 1820s. Before 1820, mail from New York took about 28 to 30 days to reach Mobile. By about 1823 carriers reduced that time to about 18 days. They reduced it only a day or two more during the early 1830s.

So important was it for the Register to meet the outgoing mails that the newspaper changed its publication time from morning to afternoon, and even changed the days of publication. In 1823, the Register published on Wednesdays and Saturdays, then switched to Tuesdays and Saturdays, and then a year later

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40 MCR April 29, 1822 3:3.
41 MCR May 27, 1825 2: 1.
42 MCR September 11, 1823 2:2; Kielbowicz, “Newsgathering,” 44.
THE MOBILE REGISTER: THE FIRST 100 YEARS

switched to Tuesdays and Fridays “in order that we may enjoy the benefit of publishing on some days suited to the arrivals and departures of the Eastern and Western mails, all of which, our issues of late, have disagreed with.”

Despite continuing interruptions in the mail service, transportation and communication with the East improved and wove Mobile into the national market economy. The Mobile Commercial Register, as its name implied, dedicated itself to providing the information necessary for the Port City to participate in that economy.

Through its boosterism, the newspaper promoted building the city, selling real estate, opening stores, building roads, trading goods, and conducting commerce. The Register served as a partner in those pursuits as well as being an enterprise in itself. By building the city as a common enterprise, the editors of the Register and the city’s businessmen hoped to increase the value of their individual investments.

By providing advertising, printing, reading rooms, and news exchanges, the newspaper made business dealings more efficient and the Register essential to the local merchants. Although public printing constituted a taxpayer subsidy of the journal, it also let people know

43 MCR January 27, 1823 2:1; February 3, 1823 2:1; February 3, 1824 2:1; February 10, 1824 2:1.
what their federal, state, and local elected representatives were doing.

Over the next 20 years, Mobile grew as more and more cotton poured through the city for export to foreign textile mills. The Register cast its lot more and more with the economics of slavery, mistakenly believing it would assure Mobile’s growth.

But as planters eventually moved with their slaves to new lands in Texas, Arkansas, and other Western states, the city’s economic fortunes in the 1850s began to decline in relation to Northern cities and other newer Southern cities. For the time, however, Mobile’s future looked bright.45

Since 1824, John W. Townsend had directed the newspaper in its mission alone. Jonathan Battelle had died in that year while on a trip to New York. Townsend sometimes found himself in need of cash and called on one of his wealthy advertisers, Thaddeus Sanford, for loans. Townsend’s inability to repay those loans led him to sell the Register to Sanford in June 1828.46

Youthful, business minded, energetic, and well-connected, Sanford would take the Register into a new journalistic era.

45 Wright, Old South, 17, 18, 32.
46 MCR November 21, 1822 3:3; unidentified clipping in MPR
Thaddeus Sanford file; Willis Brewer, Alabama: Her History, Resources, War Record and Public Men from 1540 to 1872.
(Montgomery: Barrett & Brown, 1872), 399; MCR December 5, 1822 3:2; January 6, 1823 1:2; Sanford, Thaddeus vs. Josiah Wilkins, Mobile Circuit Court Final Judgment, Book 2, 273-274; Sanford, Thaddeus vs. John W. Townsend, Book 2, 276-277; MCR June 18, 1828 2:2.
CHAPTER 2
A Press for Party and Section

Thaddeus Sanford came to Mobile to build a personal fortune and by doing so he helped build a city, a state, a political party, and a newspaper.

Sanford arrived in Mobile aboard the brigantine Tuscaloosa in November 1822 with a consignment of goods to start a mercantile store in partnership with the druggist, Dr. H. P. Benham. From their store on Dauphin Street they sold drugs, surgeon’s instruments, medical books, dictionaries, geographies, Bibles, schoolbooks, and many other items for the growing town of 2,800 and country customers.47

Young, handsome, “captivating in the propriety of his address, esteemed for his social qualities, and admired for his rectitude and aptitude in business,” Sanford became one of the town’s most active leaders. From 1824 to 1826, he:

• Served three terms on the board of aldermen

47 MCR December 5, 1822 3:2; January 6, 1823 1:2.
RALPH E. POORE

- Acted as administrator for estates
- Worked as an agent of the Aetna Fire Insurance Co. and of the Protection Marine Insurance Co.
- Held office in the Mobile Bible Society
- Served as one of the trustees of the Mobile Protestant Church. 48

In the years after Sanford took control of the Register, his business ventures and wealth grew. He aided theatrical entrepreneur Sol Smith in opening a theater. He worked for internal improvements in the state. He chartered the Bank of Mobile and served for 11 years as one of its directors. He leased space on the waterfront at Church Street from the city and developed it as wharfage.

He also accumulated some valuable real estate. Besides his own house at the northwest corner of Monroe and Royal streets, Sanford managed by 1836 to acquire several vacant lots, three brick buildings on Hitchcock’s Alley, two brick stores on Dauphin Street and two others on Royal Street. His real estate holdings had a total value of about $151,700, about $4 million in current dollars, making Sanford among the wealthiest of Mobile’s citizens. 49

48 Bernard A. Reynolds, Sketches of Mobile, From 1814 to the Present (Mobile: B. H. Richardson, 1868, reprinted 1971), 12-13, 24-26, 59; MCR May 11, 1824 2:1; November 19, 1824 2:1; Mobile Aldermen’s Minute Books, June 3, 1824, 1; December 7, 1824, 50; MCR January 3, 1826 3:1; February 17, 1826 2:1; January 3, 1826 3:1; November 30, 1826 4:4; January 15, 1828 2:1; Amos, Cotton City, 49-50.
49 Sanford also owned two male and three female slaves who worked as domestics in his home. Letter from T. Sanford to Sol Smith, Mobile, March 2, 1833 in the Sol Smith Collection,
Early in October 1832, Sanford bought Putnam P. Rea’s tri-weekly *Mobile Patriot*, combined it with his newspaper and began publishing daily under the title the *Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot*.50

As Mobile folded into the American Republic at the end of the War of 1812, the Federalist Party died and the Democratic-Republicans were left as the only active national political party. For a time, politics seemed of little importance. Few men were interested in politics before 1828, and fewer still voted.

That was perhaps why Sanford at first continued Townsend’s policy of largely not involving the paper in partisan politics. Both men allowed letters on political issues of the day but did not endorse candidates. The paper had looked on the 1824 presidential election as a distraction from more important commercial pursuits.

On the eve of the 1824 presidential election, for example, Townsend wrote that “We shall rejoice when

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50 *MCR&P* October 6, 1832 2:1.
the election is over, that the columns of newspapers may be devoted to some other use than the discussion of the Presidential election.” Townsend favored the election of William Crawford but would not say so directly in the columns of the paper.  

Sanford likewise did not endorse either Andrew Jackson or John Quincy Adams in the 1828 presidential election. After it appeared clear that Jackson had won, Sanford wrote:

“This is a result we have long expected, though it is not in accordance to our wishes; the people, however, have willed it, and that is sufficient for us. We have not mingled in the political turmoils of the day, we have no angry passions to be soothed, and no feelings either of disappointment or exultation to indulge. We have declined advocating the pretensions of General Jackson, from an honest belief that he was less eminently qualified for that high station than his distinguished competitor; and in the same sincerity, we feel free to pledge him a frank and honorable support, in all measures calculated to advance the true interests of the country.”

In the 1832 presidential election, Sanford made favorable remarks about Jackson in the newspaper’s columns but again did not endorse his candidacy.

One of the measures in which Sanford felt free to pledge Jackson his “frank and honorable support” involved conflicts with the states over the extent of

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51 MCR October 8, 1824 2:1.
52 MCR December 1, 1828 2:1.
federal authority. In Alabama, that issue presented itself in a treaty with Creek Indians. Although the Indians had given up title to their lands as a tribe in the 1830s, they retained the right to stay on the land as individuals.

Under the treaty, the federal government had the responsibility of removing all white intruders. Thousands of settlers ignored the treaty and when the U.S. marshal, backed by troops from Fort Mitchell, attempted in August 1832 to remove the settlers, a constitutional crisis resulted.

Governor John Gayle, an anti-nullification Jackson supporter, asserted the state’s jurisdiction over the territory. By the summer of 1833, it appeared as though state militia and federal troops would engage in arms.53

In October 1833, the Register said that the chief obstacle in settling the Creek lands question “is the opposition of those politicians who find gratification of their prejudices, or seek advancement of their interests, in keeping up a criminal excitement against the Federal Union.” This was chiefly a reference to Gayle, who was re-elected without opposition in the midst of the controversy.54

The Register challenged any South Carolinian to write a better nullification document than Gayle’s second inaugural address. The anti-Jackson elements in the state as yet had no clear party organization in Alabama, but the Register asserted that Gayle and others opposed Jackson’s course for party purposes.

“We are gravely told ...” the Register said of a

53 Moore, History of Alabama, 165-167.
54 MDCR&P October 10, 1833 2:1; October 19, 1833 2:1 Moore, History of Alabama, 167.
lecturing editorial in the *Alabama Journal* in Montgomery, “that ‘this is no party question.’ What no party question’—when every nullifying journal in the country, from the *United States Telegraph* to the *Tuscaloosa Expositor*, has seized hold of it, mangled it, distorted it, and misrepresented it, solely for party objects?”

State and federal governments settled the dispute without bloodshed. Francis Scott Key, on commission from President Jackson, went to the Alabama capital, then at Tuscaloosa, and negotiated a settlement with Gayle.

The conflict drove many anti-Jackson men into the embryonic Whig Party and pushed Sanford closer to the Democrats and Jackson. Sanford, who considered himself a Jeffersonian, made every attempt through the *Register* to discredit the Whigs as nullifiers and unpatriotic.

Such incidents drew to a close the so-called Era of Good Feelings and brought about the Second American Party System of loose coalitions of local and state political organizations. Those organizations began to control political patronage, including the selection of printers for the lucrative public contracts, and of postmasters, who were vital in the delivery of newspapers.

Newspapers were essential to the rise of a competitive party system. In 1775, the colonies supported just 31 newspapers. By 1835, the number of papers in the nation had soared to 1,200. Newspaper operators were often party leaders who used their

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publications to maintain party loyalty and galvanize voters on election day. Editors were repaid for their party services after election day.

In Mobile, city aldermen usually appointed whichever newspaper operator had the most friends on the council to the office of city printer. Being named city printer entitled the newspaper operator to a salary usually ranging between $600 and $1,000 a year, for which he was expected to publish the minutes of the city government and its ordinances.56

But it also entitled the operator to all other types of public advertising, to be paid at regular rates. In addition, the newspaper’s job printing shop turned out hand bills, licenses, summons, warrants, and other materials for the city.57

By 1833, the Register and other newspapers depended heavily on the postal system to gather and deliver the news. Nine out of every 10 items in the mails consisted of newspapers. Although both dailies and weeklies used carriers for local circulation, the post office handled out-of-town circulation, which

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56 MMA Box 3, Envelope 3, Folder 2, Document 68; Box 1, Envelope 3, Folder 2, Document 69; Box 1, Envelope 3, Folder 2, Document 72, Box 1, Envelope 4, Folder 2, Document 206-208; MCR&P February 7, 1833 2:1; November 23, 1832 2:4; MCR April 6, 1832 2:1.
57 MMA Box 3, Envelope 3, Folder 2, Document 68; Box 1, Envelope 3, Folder 2, Document 69; Box 1, Envelope 3, Folder 2, Document 72, Box 1, Envelope 4, Folder 2, Document 206-208; MCR&P February 7, 1833 2:1; November 23, 1832 2:4; MCR April 6, 1832 2:1.
constituted most of the copies printed.\textsuperscript{58}

Postmasters, being political appointees, often showed a preference in the delivery of newspapers. Subscribers in the central Alabama town of Cahawba complained in October 1834, for example, that the \textit{Register} arrived irregularly, while the \textit{Mobile Mercantile Advertiser}, supported by the anti-Jackson Whig Party, arrived without delay.\textsuperscript{59}

Such political realities tended to push Sanford deeper into party politics. Returning late in 1834 from a trip to the North that he had taken for his health, Sanford announced improvements in the news and commercial departments of the paper. He also stated that “The \textit{Register} will, also, as heretofore, lay claim to the character of a political journal, although politics will not be made its chief interest.” The paper would continue to support Andrew Jackson, Sanford said, with the right to have occasional differences of opinion with the president.\textsuperscript{60}

The daily newspaper’s yearly subscription price of $10 was more than most skilled worker’s made in a week. The planters, merchants, lawyers, doctors, and others who could afford it wanted a paper that provided opinions on the great political issues of the day. But most of all they wanted the latest commercial


\textsuperscript{59} MCR&P October 14, 1834 2:1; Ellison, \textit{Early Alabama Publications}, 19.

\textsuperscript{60} MCR&P October 30, 1834 2:1.
information and news of wars, disasters, markets, and other information that might affect their businesses and investments. “In a growing commercial place,” the Register said in 1835, “the first demand from a newspaper, is for Commercial Intelligence. To this, our attention will be chiefly directed.”61

The preference for distant business news limited local news to a few paragraphs. But sometimes little of interest could be found in foreign news. The Register editor had to explain that “if people on the other side of Atlantic will not go to war, and slaughter each other by the thousands, not overturn their governments, nor threaten to pick a quarrel with us, why the news market must be supplied by home production; and if that fails, we have nothing left for it but domestic manufacture.”

The editor continued to explain that large cities of the East had the advantage of picking from terrible accidents, sensational crimes, and fires. “Far different is our lot. No ‘melancholy accidents’ happen in our vicinity, and if a little fighting, or dirking, does now and then occur, we seldom find it expedient to publish it; and, even, when we do venture to put it in print, we are compelled to expunge all the interesting atrocity.”62

Neither the Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot nor the Mobile Mercantile Advertiser could ignore the sensation caused by the murder of Nathaniel Frost, whose cut and mangled body was found near the Church Street Graveyard on May 11, 1834.

“The annals of crime have seldom been stained with

61 Emery and Emery, Press and America, 140, 143; MDCR&P October 5, 1835 2:1.
62 MCR&P May 29, 1833 2:1.
a more diabolical act of atrocity than it is our painful duty at this time to record,” the Register said in reporting the murder the day after passersby found the body. Both the Register and the Mercantile Advertiser followed developments in the case in detail.63

Police suspected a printer on the Advertiser, Charles Boyington, of Frost’s murder. Boyington had befriended the tubercular Frost, with whom he shared a room in a boarding house. Boyington became the chief suspect because on the day of the murder he had taken Frost out riding and returned for supper alone. That night, he left on the steamboat James Monroe, headed upriver.64

 Authorized by the Board of Aldermen, the mayor offered a $250 reward for the capture of Boyington and another $250 if the printer were eventually convicted. Officials captured Boyington before he could reach Montgomery and returned him aboard the steamboat Courier to Mobile for trial.

An immense crowd rushed to the wharves the evening of May 15 to obtain a glimpse of the man accused of murdering his friend. The orderly crowd followed as officials took Boyington to the city jail and placed him in irons and under a strong guard.65

Boyington maintained his innocence throughout his trial in November, but the jury took only about an hour and 15 minutes to find him guilty of murder. The judge sentenced him to hang February 20, 1835. Boyington

63 MCR&P May 12, 1834 2:1; MMAdv. May 12, 1834 2:1.
64 MR July 12, 1879, HMPS clipping.
65 MR July 12, 1879, HMPS clipping; MCR&P May 15, 1834 2:1; May 16, 1834 2:1; MMAdv. May 16, 1834 2:3; MCR&P May 17, 1834 2:1.
spent nearly 10 months in prison while his lawyers appealed the conviction. The Alabama Supreme Court eventually denied the appeal.66

Legend holds that before he died, Boyington said that as a symbol of his innocence “an oak tree with a hundred roots would grow out of my grave ... .” He was buried at the Church Street Graveyard, near where passersby found Nathaniel Frost’s body. Many people claimed that an oak tree did grow from his grave.67

Reporting of Frost’s murder and Boyington’s trial represented the kind of sensationalistic stories that the penny press of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore exploited so well. The Mobile newspapers fascination with the case indicated they were willing to use the “pepper-pot” news concept in a competitive market.68

The city had two short-lived newspapers conducted in the manner of the penny press, the Mobile Daily Ledger and the Mobile Times. Being conducted in the manner the penny papers refers to business and news practices. This includes contracting with newsboys for street sales, hiring reporters, and finding ways to get and print the news faster.

But the papers didn’t sell for a penny. They sold for a Spanish picayune, about 6 ¼ cents. The newspapers actually couldn’t sell single copies for less, even if they wanted to do so. In the 1830s, about one out every four

66 MR July 12, 1879, HHPS clipping; MDCR&P November 22, 1834 2:1.
68 Mott, American Journalism, 297
circulating coins in the United States was of Spanish origin. During the economic hard times from 1834 to 1844, shortages of small change caused some businesses to produce tokens to fill the void. The picayune was the smallest denomination in circulation in Gulf Coast cities.

The failure of these penny newspapers to gain a large circulation was due in part to the city’s slim population. In 1840, Mobile had just 12,672 people and nearly half them were slaves, who couldn’t buy newspapers.69

As the Boyington case showed, sensational news reporting existed outside the penny papers, especially on issues of law and order. In the semi-frontier conditions of Mobile, the citizens often found law enforcement inadequate and sometimes appointed extra-legal groups to deal with emergencies police were thought incapable of handling.

Rumors circulated in 1835 that police had uncovered a conspiracy to foment a slave rebellion. A citizens’ meeting appointed a Committee of Vigilance, whose members included Thaddeus Sanford.

The Nat Turner slave revolt in Virginia in 1831 caused an almost constant Southern fear of a slave rebellion in the early 1830s. That made Mobilians keenly sensitive to abolitionists and their propaganda.

Through the columns of the Register, Sanford warned abolitionists and colonization societies: “We tell these gentlemen plainly, that whether slavery be or be not an evil, or whether it do, or do not admit of cure, are questions which the South will not argue with them—They are subjects which their want of opportunity

69 MDCR&P October 23, 1833 2: 1.
prevents their understanding, and their political position debars them the right of meddling with …. Sanford told them, “The slightest attempt to agitate this subject, on the part of the North, is justly regarded by the South as an incendiary intermeddling with their private affairs.”

Four free blacks who arrived aboard the ship *Warsaw* from New York in 1835 tested the determination of the Committee of Vigilance and Sanford to guard against abolitionists. When the ship landed August 20, Charles A. Henry, former newspaper editor, city tax collector, city attorney, deputy sheriff, and holder of other public posts, informed Mayor John F. Everitt that among the ship’s passengers were two free black men, named Parker and Williams, and their wives.

City law required that free blacks who were not residents of the city and found going at large be brought before city officials and fined not more than $20. Such free blacks had to put up bond to leave the city within 10 days, or they could be committed to the workhouse for six months.

City officials boarded the *Warsaw* and searched the passengers and their baggage. Police arrested the four blacks for questioning. In Parker’s trunk, officials found about a dozen copies of the *Struggler*, a newspaper published in Philadelphia by free blacks and devoted to emancipation. The trunks of the others contained only their personal belongings.

“The possession of these papers gave a complexion to the case, requiring the most prompt and vigilant action …” the *Register* said, “and it was immediately

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70 *MDCR&P* September 7, 1835 2: 1.
concluded that this was a proper occasion for the action of the committee of vigilance ."

Some of the committee members gathered at the office of their chairman, Judge Abner S. Lipscomb, to examine the copies of the *Struggler* and determine a course of action. Meanwhile, other committeemen went to the Guard House to question Parker.

Parker at first denied having any abolition newspapers, but when he learned they had been found, he told his inquisitors that he was on his way to Tampico for his wife’s health. Parker said he stopped in Mobile because he heard there was yellow fever at Tampico and that Mobile was a good place for laborers. While waiting for passage, he said he thought he could be earning high wages.

Because the copies of the *Struggler* had been carefully separated from the other papers and laid smoothly away in Parker’s trunk, the vigilance committeemen didn’t believe Parker’s assertion that they had been given to him by a black man in Brooklyn as waste and wrapping paper. White suspicions were further aroused when the committeemen discovered that Parker could read.71

The mayor sentenced the four blacks to three months in jail in default of bail. One of the strong rooms of the city hospital confined them temporarily until officers came to move Parker to the county jail for more secure keeping. As an officer escorted Parker to the jail, several men overpowered deputy and took the prisoner into the bushes applying “to him some of the Lynch discipline, subjecting him at the same time to a rigid re-

examination.”

But Parker told the men nothing at variance from his previous stories and the men returned him to the officer who took him to the jail. The four blacks didn’t serve out their sentence in Mobile. City officials put the men and their wives, at their expense, aboard a ship back to New York.\textsuperscript{72}

Sanford increasingly found that the Democrat Party offered Southerners protection for their peculiar institution and he became more deeply involved as a newspaper owner and as an individual in party politics. In November 1835, he served as a delegate to the party’s state convention in Tuscaloosa.

Two months later, Sanford announced his candidacy for mayor of Mobile. He was opposed by George W. Owen, the candidate of the Whig Party and supported by the party’s daily newspaper, the \textit{Mobile Morning Chronicle}.\textsuperscript{73}

Owen overwhelmed Sanford 516-336, showing the strength of the Whigs in Mobile. Sanford carried only his own South Ward. He took the defeat stoically: “Electioneering is, after all, not what it is cracked up to be, very especially if it prove unsuccessful, and we are accordingly ready to return to our customary labors.”

He wrote that, “We shall endeavor to make up for arrearages of industry, and since a couple of hundred of

\textsuperscript{72} MCR\&P November 2, 1835 2:1; November 3, 1835 2:1; January 22, 1836 2:1; February 18, 1836 2:3.
\textsuperscript{73} MDCR\&P March 30, 1836 2:1; March 29, 1836 2:1; April 1, 1836 2:1; HMPS unidentified clipping, May 10, 1903; MDCR&\textit{P} July 25, 1836 2:4; August 5, 1836 2:1; September 8, 1836 2:2.
voters too many, were unwilling we should direct the affairs of the city officially, we can elect ourselves to watch over them in another capacity, and perhaps, it will be to the better.”

However, Sanford didn’t remain out of politics. In August 1836, voters elected him a school commissioner along with John W. Townsend. A month later, he again served as a delegate to the state Democrat Convention.\textsuperscript{74}

Political brawls in the late 1830s frequently spilled over into the streets. But the \textit{Register} said, “we have never thought it calculated either to do good, or bring credit upon the City, to chronicle them in the papers.”\textsuperscript{75}

A Whig partisan thought that Sanford’s words referred to him and caught the newspaper operator in the street and beat him. “The attempt to silence one press in this city, by mangling and maiming its conductor,” Sanford wrote in the \textit{Register}, “has almost succeeded. The cost of the experiment, where a fellow creature’s life was nearly sacrificed to party brutality, is just forty dollars.” The next morning, more Whig partisans verbally abused Sanford’s assistant editor, Samuel F. Wilson, in the unsuccessful attempt to provoke a fight.\textsuperscript{76}

The rest of his life Sanford suffered constant pain and annoyance in his right hand on account of a broken wrist that wasn’t set properly. Sanford could be seen about town taking his snuff box, “his arm ... extended, and the hand slightly reversed, so that he is compelled to extend his right hand to take the snuff from the

\textsuperscript{74} MDCR&P August 2, 1837 2:1.
\textsuperscript{75} MDCR&P August 4, 1837 2:1.
\textsuperscript{76} Reynolds, \textit{Sketches of Mobile}, 24-26
Local political divisions and the doling out of spoils from election victories, especially public advertising, meant the Register had to become involved in political issues in its own self-interest. Thus, the paper helped to crystallize public opinion over such issues as the extent of federal power in settling the Creek lands question that made the West a new factor in national politics.

Over the protection of slavery, the Register took a sectional view, although it remained strongly pro-union. Sanford and the newspaper were more vitally interested in business news than in politics and in the late 1830s business news was not good.

Perhaps the physical violence against his person and his generally poor health as well as the onset of the Panic of 1837 are what induced Sanford in December 1837 to sell the Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot. But he would eventually return to the newspaper to direct its fortunes.

77 MDCR&P September 1, 1837 2:1.
Thaddeus Sanford showed good judgment, or had good luck, in selling the Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot when he did. The first great depression in U.S. history began in 1837 when banks in Philadelphia and New York closed May 10. As a consequence, all but four banks in the United States suspended payments of specie, one of those four being the Bank of Mobile, of which Sanford served as a director.

The rapid growth of Mobile in the 1830s had inflated real estate values and many citizens invested in property as a means of increasing their wealth. With the onset of the depression, merchants, professionals, and others who had invested in real estate suffered seriously. Others had invested heavily in cotton, whose price now spiraled downward, taking the city’s economy and many individual fortunes with it.

Sanford sold the Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot to John Forsyth, Jr. and Epaphras Kibby for about $20,000. Although they were said to have “embarked large capital in the undertaking,” Sanford also extended
THE MOBILE REGISTER: THE FIRST 100 YEARS

them considerable credit.78

The name of Forsyth was a familiar one in national politics. Forsyth’s father, John Forsyth, Sr., began his first term in Congress as a representative from Georgia in 1812, the same year “Little John” was born in Augusta.

Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1818, the elder Forsyth resigned when President Monroe appointed him as minister to Spain in 1819. But the family stayed in Washington until John Junior was almost 9. In 1821, John’ s father returned to Washington to take his family back to Madrid, where they remained until returning to the United States in 1823.

Forsyth’s Georgia district then elected him to two more terms in the U.S. House. Afterward, he served a term as governor of Georgia and returned to the U.S. Senate in 1829. He resigned in 1834 when President Jackson appointed him secretary of state, a post he was reappointed to by President Martin Van Buren and served in until his death in 1841.

The younger Forsyth received some of his education in Spain and attended the state university in Georgia until a fire destroyed the school. He then began classes at his father’s alma mater, Princeton University. In 1832, at the age of 20, he graduated valedictorian of his class.

Returning to Augusta, Forsyth studied law and was admitted to the Georgia bar in 1834. He opened a law office in Columbus, Georgia, but President .Jackson’s affection for the elder Forsyth led him in 1835 to appoint the younger Forsyth as U.S. attorney for the Southern

78 MDCR&P December 11, 1837 2:1; July 11, 1838 2:1; October 19, 1835 2:1.
District of Alabama in Mobile.\textsuperscript{79}

Being the U.S. attorney didn’t occupy all of Forsyth’s time, or ambitions, and he became an occasional contributor of political opinions to the columns of the \textit{Register} under Sanford. The two men became lifelong friends.

The opposition Whig newspaper said Forsyth’s father bought the \textit{Register} for his son. But Forsyth responded that he went into journalism against his father’s advice and without out any of the elder’s capital.

He said that his father’s “public life had taught him to be suspicious of a profession too often degraded, and instead of furnishing his son with the capital to buy the \textit{Register}, he gave him nothing but his advice, ‘never to sink the character of a gentleman into that of a partisan Editor.’” Kibby, a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army at the time, resigned his commission to join his friend Forsyth in running the \textit{Register}.\textsuperscript{80}

Kibby was born about 1810 on the Missouri frontier, where his mother and grandfather had moved from Cincinnati. After Kibby’s father died, his mother returned to Cincinnati. To help support his mother, brothers, and sisters, Kibby entered the printing trade.


\textsuperscript{80} \textit{MDCR&P} July 11, 1838 2:1
He read every book that came his way in the print shop.

In 1830, a senior patron and member of Congress provided Kibby an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Kibby graduated with honors from West Point in 1834 and President Jackson appointed him as a 2nd lieutenant in an artillery regiment in New London, Connecticut, where he married the daughter of a former general.

The Army then stationed Kibby at Fort Morgan on Mobile Point. When the Seminole War broke out in 1835, the Army ordered Kibby to Mobile to serve as quartermaster. Kibby repeatedly asked to join his regiment in Florida, but the Army found his work as quartermaster too valuable to let him go. On December 31, 1836, the Army promoted Kibby to 1st lieutenant.

Kibby resigned from the Army on December 31, 1837, to join Forsyth on the Register. Although Kibby had resigned to join the Register, the Army appointed him an agent of the quartermaster’s department. Like Forsyth, Kibby had strong connections to Democrats in government.81

When Forsyth and Kibby took over the *Register* they faced competition from four other dailies: the *Monitor*, the *Examiner*, the *Chronicle*, and the *Mercantile Advertiser*. The declining economy seemed to ensure that some of them would not survive the bad times.

The *Register* observed that Charleston, South Carolina, with a population of 40,000 supported three daily newspapers. New Orleans with 80,000 people had six dailies, the same ratio as Charleston. But Mobile, with 15,000 people, had five dailies.

“What a wise, learned, literary, political and intelligent people this must be, to sustain so much super-incumbent literature,” it said. But, the newspaper pointed out, “the thing n’est pas possible. The world owes us all a living brethren! But truly, we do not think that Mobile is called upon, or is able, to pay the debts of the whole world! Some of us will assuredly come out minus a fortune.”

The Panic of 1837 aggravated the always critical shortage of cash on the frontier as banks failed or suspended the payment of specie. Paper currency contracted sharply. Advertisers, subscribers, and those taking out job printing were increasingly unable to pay their bills to the city’s newspaper operators.

The *Register* spoke for all the city’s papers about

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of the Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy from its establishment in 1801 to (June) 1848, giving the present rank of those in service and the subsequent pursuits of those who have left service as far as known, together with the regulations for the admission of Cadets, and a synopsis of the course of study pursued at that institution (West Point, 1847) 22.

82 MDCR&P November 20, 1838 2:1.
what they faced. The editor said, “such is the general carelessness in regard to the payment of printer’s accounts, that we not only cannot live under the credit system, but can scarcely eke out the weekly cash expenses necessary to the support of our establishments.”

The Register paid cash for its materials and paid its compositors weekly in cash and so needed cash to operate. The newspaper employed a staff of about 20 and annual production costs totaled between $15,000 and $20,000, an amount equal to the debts it was owed.

The Register blamed the failure of its debtors to pay their accounts not on the depression, but on the habits of the citizens. “We know not what has come over this community,” the paper said. “Its characteristic is anti-debt paying.”

The newspaper complained because it had a bank note fall due, a few hundred dollars borrowed to pay for printing paper. To raise the needed cash, the paper selected $1,000 worth of accounts from a large lot due within the city and gave them to a collector for a day. The next day the accounts were turned over to two collectors for a morning. They collected just “three paper dollars.”

“Publishers like lovers are generally supposed to be able to live on air, but even if we were disposed to try the experiment upon ourselves,” the Register said, “we are not willing to make it upon our families or our

83 MDCR&P September 26, 1838 2:2.
84 MDCR&P August 17, 1838 2:1; November 21, 1840 2:2.
85 MDCR&P September 26, 1838 2:3.
creditors, who are not Publishers.”

The *Register, Advertiser, Chronicle,* and *Examiner* unanimously came “to the conclusion that we do not wish and are determined not to work for nothing.” The newspapers agreed that all subscriptions would be paid in advance. Instead of the usual credit of six to 12 months, job printing would be paid when rendered. The operators agreed to set their advertising rates at $1 a square and 50 cents for each subsequent insertion.

To ensure that delinquents could not go from paper to paper, the operators agreed that the names of persons whose accounts had not been paid within one month after presentation would be made known to all the publishers. The operators bound themselves not to accept advertising or job work, unless given advance payment.

Frequent complaints from customers of hardships under the regulations eventually forced the publishers to end their cooperative ad agreement and go back to charging individual rates. Cash shortages, however, remained a problem into the 1840s.

Increasing political conflicts, especially between the *Register,* which supported the Democrat Party, and the *Advertiser,* which supported the Whig Party, probably had as much to do with ending cooperation among the newspapers as customers’ complaints.

The Whig Party drew its strength from voters in

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86 *MDCR&P* September 26, 1838 2:2.
88 *MDCR&P* October 30, 1839 2:1; November 21, 1839 2:1; November 27, 1839 2:1; *MR&J* March 19, 1842 1:1; December 21, 1842 1:1.
Mobile and the up country river valley towns and plantations. In these areas, men earned their living from commerce with the outside world. Generally, Democrats drew their strength from farmers and merchants living in the northern part of the state.

Understanding where a party stood on an issue wasn’t always easy. Both Democrat and Whig parties in Alabama frequently broke into factions and then realigned. Whether Democrat or Whig, party members often shared political values and opinions on the issues of the day. Events, such as a recession, could cause voters and parties to change positions for political advantage.

As cotton prices spiraled downward and property values declined during the Panic of 1837, the Mobile city government’s revenues, derived mainly from property taxes, dropped dramatically. The city couldn’t meet the payments on more than $500,000 worth of bonds it had borrowed to finance much-needed public improvements as Mobile’s population quadrupled during the 1830s.\(^89\)

The \textit{Register} blamed a Whig faction for the city’s money problems and pushed a mixed ticket of Whigs and Democrats in March 1838 to run for the Board of Aldermen. The newspaper characterized the election as being “between reputable and intelligent citizens, and a clique who are resolved to thrust their favorites and strong popular candidates into power for the empty honors of a party victory.”

The \textit{Register} charged that it was “the open and avowed determination of the official City organ,” the \textit{Advertiser}, “to keep up the baneful spirit, leaves the

\(^{89}\) Amos, \textit{Cotton City}, 122-124.
clique of which that paper is the mouth-piece, in the attitude of the enemies of good government .... The Register’s “citizen ticket.” lost the election and the newspaper noted “our ‘forlorn hope,’ the citizens ticket, has proven no ‘May flower.’ Our favorite has been woefully beaten.”

The political rancor increased the bitterness over bidding for the lucrative public printing contracts from the city. In July 1838, one of the aldermen asked Thaddeus Sanford, just retired from the Register, if it was proper for the Advertiser, then the city printer, to submit a $750 bill for extra printing in addition to its $1,000 yearly city printer fee.

Sanford said while the $1,000 was not enough money for the work done, he had always considered himself bound by his contract. As a taxpayer, Sanford said he would be angered if more were paid to the Advertiser. The Advertiser, strapped for cash and in serious financial difficulty, attacked Sanford in its columns for the loss of the payment.

Forsyth and Kibby came to Sanford’s defense. “Mr. Sanford is vilified because he would not, against his conscience say, that the new demand on the City Treasury, which God knows has suckers enough, was not right and proper,” they said.

The editors pointed out that the Advertiser, which claimed it could not do the printing work in 1837 for $1,000, was again asking to be appointed city printer at a reduced salary of $600. The Advertiser, nevertheless, got the appointment because the Whigs had a majority on

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90 MDCR&P February 27, 1838 2: 1; March 27, 1838 2: 1.
the Board of Aldermen.\textsuperscript{91}

The \textit{Advertiser} had a desperate need for money to survive the hard times of the depression. The paper had attempted to cut its costs by employing “Rats,” a term the union men of Mobile Typographical Association applied to runaway apprentices and “two-thirds men” who underbid the association’s regular scale of prices. When the association members protested, the \textit{Advertiser} fired the union men and hired the non-union men in their place.

The typographical association responded by publishing an open letter in the \textit{Register} appealing for public support. \textit{Advertiser} owner Sol Smith was frequently out of town looking after his theater interests, the letter said. W. H. Keating, who Smith had left in charge, was cheating his workers. The letter said Keating, “who instead of liquidating the demands of the workingmen, was believed by them to appropriate the funds to purposes not connected with the interests of the establishment, and they very properly refused to labor until their wages were paid.”\textsuperscript{92}

Keating charged in reply that the association represented a combination to coerce employers into meeting their employees’ demands. “In this,” the association responded, “the Editor of the \textit{Advertiser} has shown himself profoundly ignorant of the Association and its principles, and has wantonly traduced its character and that of its members.”

The issue remained bitter and at its anniversary meeting the association toasted “The vermin of the

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{MDCR&P} July 11, 1838 2:1.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{MDCR&P} December 13, 1837 2:3.
Advertiser—Like the sloth on a verdant oak: they have eaten out its substance, and still true to their nature, will no doubt speedily desert ‘the sinking ship.’”

The sinking fortunes of the Advertiser forced owner Sol Smith to return Mobile in late 1838 to tend to the newspaper’s financial condition. He had decided “to sellout, get rid of, or throw into the river the Mobile Mercantile Advertiser establishment, which was involving me in losses I was little able to bear.” Smith had about $18,000 invested in the paper besides losses in operating costs.

Before Smith could tumble the types and presses into the Mobile River, Charles C. Langdon and E. O. Harris approached him about buying the paper, if Smith would be willing to take what they had to offer in payment. “Any thing—any thing whatever,” the desperate Smith told the two men, “lands, notes, cash, bull-pups—any thing. Long credit, short credit; fix it your own way.”

Whig Party leaders in Mobile had decided to assist Langdon and Harris in buying the paper in order to make it a voice for the party. Langdon had just completed an unsuccessful run for the Legislature, but his abilities greatly impressed the Whig leaders.
Langdon and Harris at first offered Smith $18,000 payable in Illinois bounty lands at $4.50 an acre, a $5,000 promissory note from two other men, and made their own promissory note for the balance. In addition, Langdon and Harris agreed to pay Smith half the amount owed the Advertiser by its advertisers and subscribers.

Smith had his lawyers draw up the agreement while Langdon and Harris looked over the Advertiser’s account books. Distressed at what they had discovered, they told Smith they had only gone through a few pages of the ledger and the debts owed the paper already amounted to $9,000 and probably would total more than $100,000.

Frightened that Langdon and Harris were about to back out of their deal, Smith quickly struck a bargain. “Pay me for half the debts you have already found due, and I throw the rest in,” which the two men immediately agreed to.95

Smith offered the 33-year-old Langdon some parting advice: “You are young and ambitious and think you know it all, but you will find there is a great deal to learn. It is important to be right and consistent. Editors are expected to take position upon all new questions that arise, but don’t be in a hurry about it. Take old Davy Crockett’s motto as your guide: ‘Be sure you are right, then go ahead.’ You mustn’t guess at it, but be sure, and then go ahead; that is take your position and let not all the powers of hell and earth divert you from your purpose.” Smith also told him “You must make the world believe you will fight, and then you will never

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95 Smith, Theatrical Management, 134-135.
have occasion for a fight.”

Smith’s advice “made a deep and lasting impression on my mind,” Langdon recalled years later, and he tried to live up to Smith’s words. A newspaper colleague observed that in Langdon’s hands the Advertiser became a “sheet of flame” with personal and political attacks against the Democrats.

“He was so hot and fiery that the country people generally believed he lived on red pepper, and the sobriquet of ‘Slangdon,’ indicated the estimation in which he was held by the Democrats.” An extreme Whig partisan, Langdon could see no good in his opponents. “It was all war—war to the knife ....”

Fierce business and political competition now defined the relationship between the Register and the Advertiser. Although the city had other newspapers, both dailies and those issued less often, these two dominated the field and set the agenda on every issue.

They even jabbed at each other during the great yellow fever epidemic of 1839. The epidemic, which began in August, was one of the worst in the city’s history. By November, the fever had killed about 700 people. Most of the town’s stores closed; the post office opened only in the mornings and the banks opened only two hours a day.

At the urging of his partner Epaphras Kibby, John Forsyth had taken his family to Mobile Point while Kibby looked after the paper. Forsyth’s 1-year-old son, John Forsyth III, caught the fever. He survived, but suffered brain damage as a result.

96 MR? December 18, 1885, HMPS clipping.
Then Kibby caught the fever in early September and turned his duties over to D. J. Dowling. The newspaper’s subscription collector, bookkeeper, pressman, compositors, and carriers all had the fever. The newspaper had “no one on hand but the Foreman of the office and the temporary editor!” the paper reported. Kibby died September 15, 1839, and members of the Alabama State Artillery escorted his coffin to the cemetery.98

Charles J. B. Fisher, local editor of the Register and fellow member of the Alabama State Artillery, led in the efforts to organize relief for victims of the yellow fever epidemic. He and 11 other men, who frequented the Alhambra saloon on Dauphin Street for lunch, raised funds and gave nursing aid to the poor and other victims of the epidemic. Fisher suggested that all those who could not get out of the city be eligible for the “Can’t-Get-Away Club,” as the group became known.

The epidemic forced the Register to cease daily publication in favor of three issues a week because, as it explained, its crew “is cut down by sickness, absence, and death, which must account for the state of our columns.” The city’s three other dailies also cut back on their edition, usually to once a week.

The Advertiser started jabbing at the Register for not publishing the minutes of city meetings, for which the Register had a contract. The Register noted, in return, that Charles C. Langdon and his closest friend were sick, the Advertiser’s whole printing force was sick, one clerk was

98 MDCR&P September 7, 1839 2:1; November 6, 1839 2:2; February 27, 1840 2:4; September 20, 1839 2:1; Centennial Remembrance Book.
dead, and the other out of town. Furthermore, the *Register* chided, the *Advertiser* purported to be issued in the morning but instead put forth at noon.\(^9^9\)

At the height of the 1839 epidemic, a fire in October destroyed about 25 blocks of the city, the most destructive fire the city had experienced in a wave of arson that had begun earlier in the year. The *Register*, impatient that the arsonist hadn’t been caught, warned: “We do not know but that a lamp post might be his swinging place, without jury and without clergy.”

Losses from the October fire totaled $1.6 million and among the 500 buildings destroyed were the post office, the Planters’ and Merchants’ Bank, the Mansion House hotel, and the unfinished Government Street Hotel. The *Register* barely escaped burning, but the volunteer firefighters turned their engines’ hoses on the building to prevent its catching fire. Rumors began that slaves set the fires in preparation for a revolt. Although the rumors were groundless, they increased tension in the city.

The multiple calamities befalling the city caused the *Advertiser* to observe, “Mobile seems indeed a doomed city. Have we not drank deep enough of the bitter cup of adversity and affliction’? When and where will our

calamities end? Alas! Heaven only knows!”

The city had experienced waves of calamities: business depression, unemployment, labor unrest, yellow fever, fires, and fears of a slave revolt. These misfortunes and relentless competition now defined the social climate in which the Register and the Advertiser faced the political contests of 1840.

The newspapers thrived on the public’s demand for political news. Political managers excited public emotions with open-air rallies and partisans posted political handbills on fences and walls. The Register and the Advertiser had become essential to their parties for swaying public opinion. Their editors often had power equal or exceeding that of any officeholder.

John Forsyth became deeply and personally involved in the Democrat Party National Convention in Baltimore, where the Georgia delegation nominated his father as the vice presidential candidate. Forsyth’s presence in Baltimore and his father’s nomination raised rumors that he was about to accept a federal appointment, but Forsyth denied the rumors.

Political tempers back in Mobile, meanwhile, reached a feverish pitch as Whigs and Democrats vied for the mayor’s office, the Board of Aldermen, and the Common Council. Voters elected Whig majorities to those offices in March. Political fevers heated up further during the summer as electioneering continued for the Legislature, Congress, and the presidency.

100 Amos, Cotton City, 151; MDCR&P April 2, 1839 2:2; MR October 18, 1871 2: 3, HMPS clipping.
101 MDCR&P June 23, 1840 2:3; May 19, 1840 2:4; March 6, 1840 2: 2; Reynolds, Sketches of Mobile, 28-29.
In his absence, Forsyth selected Hamilton Ballentyne, a former editor of the Mobile Examiner and of the Literary Gazette, to take charge of the Register. Perhaps because of his literary proclivities, Ballentyne was in the habit of correcting through the columns of the Register both the grammar and facts presented by Charles C. Langdon in the Advertiser.

When Ballentyne corrected one of Langdon’s statements relating to the politics of the Charleston Courier, Langdon let loose with “the most indecent epithets to the editor—‘Hireling’ was the common name; and one ‘who lies for food,’” were applied to Ballentyne. Ballentyne called the attack “a multitude of most offensive imputations and personal insults, levelled not at opinions … but at the person and the integrity of the writer, and particularly the fact that he is paid for his labor by the absent proprietor.”

For his part, Ballentyne charged Langdon and the Advertiser’s co-editor, Walter Smith, with numerous financial misdealings. He said that Smith, who was also the city recorder, used city wharves without paying any rent. He also said that Smith, a brigadier general of the Alabama militia, took a “large discount” for his fund-raising services as secretary of the Relief Committee.

Ballentyne brought into public debate charges of fraud lodged against Langdon. The charges were contained in a lawsuit against the Mobile Branch of the Bank of Alabama filed by some men from Perry County.

Ballentyne said “when C. C. Langdon shall have

102 Col. and Mrs. Soren Nelson, A History of Church Street Graveyard (Mobile: Jordan Printing Co., 1963), 34; MCR&P March 26, 1840 2:2; May 18, 1840 2:2; September 2, 1840 2:2.
refunded to the State the money which he obtained under peculiar circumstances from the Branch Bank in this city, it will be time for [him] to sneer at honest industry laboring for an independent support. As unscrupulously as these men call us a purchasable commodity, their notes, endorsed by every hanger on of their office, could not tempt us to the gross indecencies that they are guilty of daily.”

Both Langdon and his partner in the cotton commission business, Martin A. Lea, served as directors of the Mobile Branch of the Bank of Alabama. As such, they were allowed to take out for themselves substantial loans with little or no collateral. The firm of Lea & Langdon also often handled loans for merchants and planters in the interior with whom it did business. For its services Lea & Langdon received a commission.

In 1840, several Perry County men, responding to a state bank suit against them, said that they had authorized Lea & Langdon to take out loans from the bank on their behalf. But they charged that Lea & Langdon either converted the funds for its own use or drew funds much larger than they had authorized. Three notes totaling $10,913.19 were supposed to have been no more than $2,000, the men said.

Although the loans were made in 1838, the men were unaware of the deception until the bank sued them two years later. Another man charged Langdon with pocketing money that had been intended as a payment due on a bank loan.

Ballentyne took personal offense to charges in the

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103 MDCR&P March 26, 1840 2:2; March 31, 1840 2:2.
104 MCR&P May 18, 1840 2:2; July 30, 1840 2:2.
Advertiser on the morning of May 16 that accused members of the Democrat Party with acts of violence against the Whig Party convention in Baltimore. The Democrat Party, the Advertiser said, was “composed of assassins, resolved and prepared to murder Whig voters.”

That afternoon, the Register published a letter signed by “Vindex” that said the court records regarding the fraud charges against Langdon had been stolen. The writer suggested that Langdon took them.

Newspaper practice of the time allowed readers to submit letters anonymously. The idea was that by stripping personal identities from letters, writers and readers could enter into conversation as equals rationally engaging with the topics of the day. Letter writers often had to make themselves known to the editor, who judged whether the submissions were worthy of publication.

In explaining why he published the charges against Langdon, Ballentyne said, “He has had his warning time after time … but he chose to repeat his insults constantly … till longer charity and forbearance were criminal. He provoked the exposure, and if it afford him the opportunity of representing himself to his party as a persecuted man for their sake, he may improve it to the best of his well-known talent for misrepresentation.”

Vindex’s letter enraged Langdon. That night, armed with “a huge bludgeon in his hand,” Langdon walked into the editorial room of the Register and demanded to know who wrote the letter. Ballentyne told Langdon that if he would return in an hour, then he would give

105 MDCR&P May 16, 1840 2:3; May 18, 1840 2:2.
Langdon the writer’s name or assume the responsibility himself.

That didn’t satisfy Langdon and he poured out a stream of curses on Vindex and Ballentyne. Ballentyne ordered Langdon to leave the room, which he did.

Ballentyne didn’t expect Langdon to return. But anticipating that he might and that he also carried a gun beneath his coat, Ballentyne obtained a small pistol in order to defend himself.

Langdon hadn’t cooled off after leaving the Register office and gathered a meeting at the Alhambra saloon on Dauphin Street of Whig supporters who resolved to get satisfaction out of the hide of the Register editor. After about an hour, Langdon, still clutching his club, and nearly 100 of his supporters headed for the Register building.

While the angry Whig partisans, “reeking with hard cider and patriotism,” surrounded the Register building, Langdon went inside to confront Ballentyne. An employee ushered Langdon into the editorial room where Ballentyne waited alone.

Langdon repeated his demand for the name of Vindex and began to verbally abuse Ballentyne. The Register editor raised his pistol and cocked it. He told Langdon that if he did not “leave the room forthwith, I would shoot him. He literally ‘backed out’ like a whipped Spaniel,” Ballentyne crowed in the Register.

Unable to get their satisfaction from Ballentyne, Langdon and his followers, wielding “sticks of timber more suitable for erection of log cabins,” the Register said in a reference to Whig Party candidate William Harrison’s log cabin campaign for the presidency, “than for the ornament or use of gentlemen,” smashed the
newspaper’s reading table “and the sash and glass of one of the doors shivered to atoms by their violence. In addition, oaths were freely uttered, vengeance was threatened, and every other method taken to overawe the person assailed.”106

The city’s police, dependent on Whig office holders for their jobs, just looked on. A few days before, the marshal and one of his deputies had dragged some Democrats from a party meeting and fined them for “riotous and disorderly conduct” for continuing the meeting late into the night.

Ballentyne waited a week expecting to be called before City Recorder Walter Smith to testify against the men who smashed up the Register office. Because Smith was Langdon’s colleague on the Advertiser, Ballentyne waited in vain.

Meanwhile, the Register and the Advertiser continued to duel across their columns, which sometimes threatened to become a real duel. “When the proper time arrives to vindicate himself from their base, malignant, and systematic assaults upon his reputation,” Langdon wrote of himself against the Register’s charges, “he will select a field which he deems more appropriate than the columns of a newspaper.”

Ballentyne retorted that, “The attacks of the Register were neither base, malignant, nor systematic. They were made in self-defense, and we stand ready and anxious to prove them, whenever the time mentioned above shall arrive.”

At times it seemed that Ballentyne might have to

106 MDCR&P May 18, 1840 2:2; May 19, 1840 2:2; May 22, 1840 2:2.
fight a duel with more than one Whig. In recounting the events of forcing Langdon out of his office, Ballentyne had written “We should like also to give some of his sneaking correspondents a similar lesson.”

One of the Advertiser’s correspondents, “Yankee Democrat,” said “that so far as I am concerned, he shall be gratified.” Yankee Democrat left his name with Langdon if Ballentyne wanted to accept the challenge and guaranteed Ballentyne that he would “not receive him in a dark room with pistols in hand.” Ballentyne responded, “If the fellow who wrote it were not a braggart, instead of thus returning billingsgate for a fancied insult, he would have come directly to the editor of the Register and demanded satisfaction.”

The conflict had the effect of increasing circulation, if nothing else. The Register ran off an extra 150 copies of one edition because of the demand for papers during the controversy. This would seem to indicate that the Register used newsboys for street sales because the extra copies would not have gone to regular subscribers.107

The conflict between Ballentyne and Langdon became so intense because in 1840 the Democrat and Whig parties for the first time had coherent national, state, and local organizations. The local organizations in cities such as Mobile worked diligently to get the electorate to the polls for their party.

The suffering caused by the Panic of 1837 particularly aided the Whig Party. The Whigs benefited from popular discontent at the Democrats, the party-in-power in both the state and national capitals.

107 MDCR&P May 18, 1840 2:2; May 22, 1840 2:2; June 23, 1840 2:2; June 27, 1840 2:1; August 1, 1840 2:3.
The *Register* greeted the news of Whig state election victories in August, including Langdon’s election as representative to the Legislature, with shouts of the “Glorious Victory of the Bank Aristocracy!!” The paper charged the Whigs with “resuscitating dead men” and “galvanizing nine months’ old corpses.”

The paper said, “There have been frauds somewhere; and as the Whigs had all the inspectors, and conducted affairs as best pleased themselves, it is a fair presumption that they did not scrutinize the claims of their friends with that attention which they gave to their opponents.”

The Whig successes so far in 1840 intoxicated the party members with the prospect of electing a Whig president in November. The *Advertiser* and the *Register* hurled acrid editorial attacks at one another.

*Register* editor Hamilton Ballentyne tried to brand the Whigs as abolitionists and in September 1840 accused some Whigs of the city with corresponding secretly with abolitionists in the North. A Whig committee called on him and asked for names and proof of his charges. Ballentyne refused to be questioned by the men. The *Advertiser* likewise tried to label the *Democrats* as abolitionists.

The charges amused the *Gallinipper*, the city’s humor newspaper. “It is laughable to see how the political papers of our city accuse each other’s candidates of being Abolitionists, and then throw it back again as an unwelcome appendage which neither is willing to acknowledge! Poor Abolitionism finds but

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108 *MDCR&P* August 3, 1840 2:2; Aug 7, 1840 2:2.
109 *MDCR&P* September 21, 1840 2:3.
little favor with either party, and like Mahmet’s coffin, stands suspended between heaven and earth—belonging to neither.”

When the country elected the Whig Party’s William Henry Harrison to the presidency in November, the Register said the Democrats would bide their time till the next election. “In the meantime, brother editors of the Whig press,” the Register warned, “our day has come; you run the gauntlet—we put on the stripes.”

The Whigs finally experienced election reverses in 1841 when the corruption of the state bank became a statewide political issue. At the request of Democrat Governor Benjamin Fitzpatrick, John A. Campbell, a Democrat from Mobile, investigated the bank and his report led to its liquidation.

His findings, which were highly publicized in Mobile, revealed that Langdon borrowed $89,311 that went unrepaid. His debt and involvement with a bank the public believed to be thoroughly corrupt contributed to his defeat in a bid for re-election to the Legislature.

Langdon angrily lashed out in the columns of the Advertiser at the members of his party for “giving the LIE to their professions” to support Whig candidates and for “disgracing their party” for failing to go to the polls and assure his re-election.

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110 Gallinipper September 12, 1840 3:1.
111 MDCR&P November 16, 1840 2:2.
113 MDCR&P August 11, 1841 2:1.
In an odd move, William Garrett, the Democrat Alabama secretary of state, took the state printing contract away from the Register and gave it to the Advertiser. “We can hardly tell whether he is most delighted that this new sop has fallen into his willing mouth, or that it has fallen out of ours,” the Register observed. The Democrat editors said they at least had the satisfaction of Langdon not returning to the Legislature.

The Register also revealed that since the Whig victories in 1840, Langdon had tried to talk the Whig-inclined merchants of the city into not advertising in the Register. That strategy, the Register reported, met with “stinging rebuke” by the mercantile “men of his own political fraternity” as shown in the results of the election. What’s more, the Register’s list of advertisers had doubled in the last year and its subscriptions increased. Controversy proved profitable.¹¹⁴

Just at the moment the Democrat Party’s fortunes seemed to be rising, John Forsyth suffered a personal setback. His father died unexpectedly on October 21, 1841, in Washington, D.C. Forsyth left Mobile for Columbus, Georgia, to settle his father’s estate.

Forsyth had apparently planned to return to Mobile but not to the Register. In an odd turn of events, after four years as one of the Democrat Party’s most vocal partisan editors, Forsyth announced he was no longer going to be a party man.

Forsyth and his editorial partner Hamilton Ballentyne launched the independent Mobile Daily Ledger on December 6, 1841. They told readers the paper was

¹¹⁴ MDCR&P August 11, 1841 2:2.
“neither devoted to the support of any particular political party … nor yet confined to a strait-laced neutrality.” The two men said the penny system reaps “harvests of rich rewards” for newspaper owners, the “best evidence of its utility and favor with the public.” Forsyth and Ballentyne were looking to make money.

But legal issues dragged on with settling the estate of his father and Forsyth largely conducted his affairs from Columbus. In 1845, Forsyth retuned to Mobile to sell his Summerville home. He had decided to stay in Columbus and it would take him until 1850 to liquidate his father’s estate.

Because Forsyth still owed Thaddeus Sanford for the purchase of the Register, Sanford had resumed ownership of the paper as the easiest means of settling accounts. The change in owners may have been in the works before Forsyth’s father died and before the Ledger began publication.

Upon returning to ownership of the paper, Sanford combined the Mobile Daily Commercial Register and Patriot with his former partner Samuel F. Wilson’s Merchants & Planters Journal, begun just three years before. The combined papers published under the name Mobile Register and Journal on December 1, 1841, just a few days before the Ledger began.115

Perhaps the most significant news for Mobile’s newspapers in the late 1830s was that they survived the

multiple calamities of economic depression, labor unrest, yellow fever, and fire. Turmoil, in fact, stimulated a demand for newspapers from the public who looked to the politically connected editors for proposed solutions.

The *Register* for the Democrats and the *Advertiser* for the Whigs made use of that demand to promote their parties’ interests. That both newspapers survived is an indication of how committed people were to the two parties.
Combining the Register and the Journal to form a single newspaper reflected Thaddeus Sanford’s business experience and good sense of timing. The local economy had begun recovering from the effects of the Panic of 1837 as the cotton market revived. By the mid-1840s, the port each year exported more than 500,000 bales of cotton, five times the annual exports of the 1830s.

The return of prosperity allowed Sanford to improve the Register and expand its influence. The New Orleans Daily Picayune, in an evaluation years later, compared Sanford to the wise King of Pylos described in Homer's Odyssey. The Picayune crowned Sanford as “the Nestor of the press of Alabama, if not the whole southwest.”

In the booming cotton business, the Mobile market fluctuated more than most in the country. Three other major markets, New York, New Orleans, and Havana,

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116 New Orleans Daily Picayune, September 5, 1854 1:5.
affected prices at Mobile. A surplus or scarcity in one could change prices daily.

The planters of the interior and their city business agents, cotton factors, therefore, found the latest commercial news absolutely essential. The factor forwarded market reports to planters through the dozens of weekly publications called “prices current” printed by the Register, other newspapers, and even by many printing shops that did not publish a newspaper.117

The prices current carried the retail prices of most goods, shipping rates on the Alabama River, market, rates at U.S. and foreign ports, tables of exports, receipts and stocks of cotton, and a list of vessels in Mobile and at other ports. The publications also reported on the condition of banks throughout the nation and rates of specie, as well as made editorial remarks on different markets.

Factors, merchants, and other businessmen bought the publications in large lots to send to their clients. The publications came folded and ready for mailing. The reports cost about $10 a year for 100 copies of each edition, or could be bought in single copies for about 12.5 cents. The prices current also provided space for ads, at about $10 a square under a yearly contract, or at $1 an insertion for others.

Even though business dropped off dramatically during the summer, the Register continued the weekly publications “regardless of the fact … it has been a tax upon the proprietor.” The paper considered its prices

current important for current market information and as a history of the city’s commerce.\(^{118}\)

Increasingly, news of current events was the commodity that readers demanded most from their newspapers. The size of the paper pages, slow hand composition and presses, scarce skilled labor, the amount of advertising, and slow mail delivery affected the Register’s ability to report the news.

Publishers of the period limited newspapers to four pages because they thought that adding more pages “hid” inside matter from readers. Printing the extra pages also required taxing and time-consuming hand composition.

Setting type by hand had changed little since the time of Gutenberg. Standing in front of his type cases, a compositor held in his left hand a stick, a piece of metal or wood, with a gauge along one edge and a slot along the other. This allowed the compositor to set the line of type to the exact length. Each line of type had to be justified from end to end of the stick so that when it was locked in the heavy metal frame, called a chase, it was ready to be put on the bed of the printing press.\(^{119}\)

The labor involved in getting matter into type meant that as much as possible had to be set ahead of time. This explains why the advertising rates the Register quoted included the condition that the advertiser couldn’t change the ad frequently.

\(^{118}\) \textit{MDCR&P} October 2, 1837 2:1; November 10, 1838 2:1; November 4, 1839 2:1; November 9, 1839 2:2; \textit{MR&J} July 29, 1842 2:2; \textit{MDCR&P} November 7, 1834 2:1; October 11, 1838 2:1; September 29, 1837 2:1.

When the newspaper bought some new type in 1841, the entire staff of compositors had to work for three days to reset the four pages of the daily in the new type. The editors explained that “those who know anything about it, are aware that it is no small job to set up the entire four sides of the paper anew.”

To reduce the workload on the compositors, the editors reduced the amount of editorial matter in the paper. That still wasn’t enough. The Register had to skip publication one day in order to complete the changeover to the new type.¹²⁰

A lack of skilled printers also often disrupted publication schedules and the newspaper frequently advertised its need for journeymen printers. The seasonal nature of the cotton trade and the resultant boom in population during the winter meant that the Register needed more hands in the winter than in the summer.

During the summer, the Register sometimes reduced the size of the newspaper’s sheet and cut publication from six days a week to just three. Not until 1856 did the Register continue daily publication through the summer months. The fluctuation in the size of the newspaper made it hard for printers to remain in the city year round, contributing to the shortage of skilled compositors.¹²¹

Apprenticing teenage boys to the newspaper helped

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¹²¹ MCR December 17, 1821 2:6; November 16, 1824 1:1; MDCR&P November 16, 1835 2:3; MDR November 1, 1859 2:1; MEN November 23, 1865 2:1; for an example in the reduction in the number of ads see MCR July 10, 1823, MDR July 1856.
stabilize the labor supply. The Register often advertised for boys ages 12 to 14 “who can read and write, and bring testimonials of good character.”

Apprenticeship usually meant that the teenager became indentured to the publisher in order to learn the printing trade. The apprentice signed a contract, usually along with a parent, agreeing to serve his master faithfully, not to embezzle, play cards, dice, or other unlawful games, and not to go to taverns. He promised not to get married or run away. In return, the publisher agreed to provide food, washing, lodging, and some money, perhaps $20 a year. The publisher also might see to it the apprentice went to school.\(^{122}\)

An apprentice seldom found good examples to follow among the journeymen compositors and pressmen. Many veteran printers gathered at Dominick Pizzani’s saloon at the corner of Conti and Royal streets to play dominoes and a drinking game called “Round the Horn.”\(^{123}\)

Wages for typesetters in Mobile compared favorably with those elsewhere in the country in the 1840s. Skilled labor was hard to come by on the frontier and Mobile typesetters earned about $15.60 for a six-day week of long hours. Printers on New York newspapers received about $15 and about $9 in Boston.

Mobile printers in 1854 decided that rising prices for food, rent, and clothes had eroded their wages and so they struck the offices of the Register and the Advertiser.

\(^{122}\) MDCR&P February 7, 1840 2:5; Margaret Ross, Arkansas Gazette: The Early Years 1819-1866. (Little Rock Arkansas Gazette Foundation, 1969), 5.
\(^{123}\) Reynolds, Sketches of Mobile, 47.
The strikers demanded a 25 percent increase, that would have raised their weekly wage to about $19.50. About eight months after the strike began, the typesetters and publishers agreed on a 12.5 percent increase to $17.50 a week.\textsuperscript{124}

The Register paid compositors in cash on Saturday night. How much they actually received depended on how many thousands of “ems” of type they had set during the week. The compositors got about 29 cents for each 1,000 ems, about 50 lines of type. Only the fastest compositors could set more than 1,000 ems in an hour.\textsuperscript{125}

Newspaper presses also limited the Register’s ability to present the news and to print more than four pages. The earliest presses on the frontier were simple but slow. Their simplicity allowed them to be hauled in wagons and flatboats and to be handled roughly without fear that they would be damaged.

Printing from those presses required time and hard labor. Often the type form on the bed of the press consisted of two pages, but the platen, which pressed the paper against the type, covered only one page. To print one side of the paper, the printer had to pull a lever twice on a torsion screw to apply pressure on the platen and print one side of the paper.

Usually, workmen printed the outside pages early in the week, leaving the inside pages for last. The Register in its early years made up the entire paper in

\textsuperscript{124} Mott, American Journalism, 313; Amos, Cotton City, 84-85.
\textsuperscript{125} An “em” is a measurement of type equal to the size of the letter “m,” from which it gets its name, in the typeface being used; MDCR&P December 28, 1839 2:2; MPR June 23, 1974 F, 1:2.
advance, leaving room for the ship news collected on the morning of the day the paper published.

In his first ownership of the Register, Sanford improved the newspaper in 1836 with a longer sheet that also was wider by two columns. He could do that because he imported from New York a Napier press that increased the productivity of the office. By 1841, the Register had applied steam to its presses further increasing productivity. ¹²⁶

The mechanical complexity of publishing a paper helps explain why it would have been hard for the Register to fill its columns with the latest breaking news. Because of the time and effort it took to set type, advertisers, furthermore, could not have their ads changed daily to feature sales or arrival of new products.

As the Register became more profitable, increased the size of its pages, and got faster presses, it tended to publish more news, both local and distant. To fill the additional space the newspaper advertised for “A reporter of police trials ….” who could wield “a ready, racy and witty pen …” and for which “a fair and ready price will be paid.”

The Register regularly invited “the pens of our friends to furnish us with communications upon any subject of local or public interest, literary, scientific, moral, or political” provided that personalities were avoided. The paper wanted news, rumors, speculations, dreams, secrets “and as few murders, suicides and

horrible catastrophes as possible." The paper said it wanted “to make the Register the mirror in which to reflect society as it is, where man can see his likeness, and learn to better his social and moral condition.”  

Because of the importance of political and economic connections with the East, Sanford in his first ownership of the Register made arrangements for a Washington correspondent to cover Congress. He now strengthened the connections with the East by expanding on the Register’s news service with correspondents in New York, Boston, and other Eastern cities.  

The correspondents provided some special reports, but for most of its news stories the Register still depended on its exchange papers delivered through the mails, which were far from regular. “With the mails, it is either a surfeit or a famine,” the Register noted in a typical complaint. “We had hardly accommodated ourselves to the stereotyped notice ominously hung out at the Post Office yesterday ‘no mail east of Charleston,’ when a steamboat from Montgomery, was announced, with something less than a cart load of our missing papers ... We are almost as much perplexed with the mass of matter before us as we were for the want of it, scarcely knowing what to select.”  

In 1836, Postmaster General Amos Kendall, himself a newspaperman, had established a pony express service for the main mail routes. That reduced the travel time on the route through Mobile to New York and Washington

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127 MDCR&P January 3, 1838 2:1; November 21, 1840 2:2.
128 MCR&P April 9, 1834 2:1; January 15, 1838 2:1; February 10, 1838 2:1; October 23, 1840 2:2; MR&J September 16, 1847 2:2.
129 MDR February 1, 1850 2:1
to about seven days. The express riders didn’t carry entire newspapers, but rather “slips,” proof sheets of important stories.

Railroads eventually replaced the pony express and steamships speeded transatlantic crossings. By the 1840s, the Register could with some regularity organize its mail dispatches in a column under the heading “BY-TODAY’S MAIL.”¹³⁰

Americans moving into the new Republic of Texas in the 1840s repeated the frontier pattern that once characterized the Alabama territory. Mobile now served as one of the entrepots for Southern settlers and their slaves heading for Texas.

The Register exuberantly supported the settlement of Texas. In the mid-1830s, the newspaper informed its readers of the developments there through its exchanges with Texas papers. During Texas’ war of independence, a general in the Army of Texas reported information directly to the Register.

Interest ran high because many of the defenders of the Alamo had been from Alabama and its neighboring states. When the Mexican Army twice invaded the Republic of Texas in 1842, Thaddeus Sanford and Charles C. Langdon both served on the Friends of Texas Committee to raise funds to aid the Texans.¹³¹

When the mail from New Orleans on May 3, 1846, brought news that the new state of Texas had been

¹³¹ MCR&P April 25, 1834 2:1; MDCR&P March 28, 1836 2:1; MR&J March 19, 1842 2:3; May 4, 1846 2:2.
invaded by Mexican forces, the mayor called for a meeting of citizens at 7:30 p.m. at the theater. As the time arrived, people crowded the building from the orchestra pit floor to the ceiling. They jammed the stage and lobby and backed up to the door steps.

“War! War!” the Register headlined the news from the Rio Grande. “Much is to be done to-day. Time presses—Action! Action! is the word now!”\(^{132}\)

Because New Orleans served as the gathering place for troops and supplies headed for the war, the newspapers there, especially the Picayune, were the major source of news for the rest of the country about the war. The founder of the Picayune, George W. Kendall, had been a typesetter on the Register for Sanford in 1833 before moving to New Orleans. Kendall now became the Mexican War’s most famous correspondent and the Register copied his letters to the Picayune.\(^ {133}\)

Kendall and the Picayune established a cooperative news service with Baltimore Sun founder Arunah S. Abell to get the freshest news of the war. Mobile newspapers did not participate in the coverage because the expense was greater than any of them could bear. Yet they benefited from Kendall’ s enterprise.\(^ {134}\)

Telegraph lines extended no farther south than

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\(^ {132}\) MR&J March 19, 1842 2:3; May 4, 1846 2:2.


\(^ {134}\) Kendall, “Kendall,” 276-277; Fletcher H. Green, The Role of the Yankee in the Old South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), 68.
Richmond when the war with Mexico began. In order to
get the news northward as quickly as possible, Kendall
and Abell established a pony express from New Orleans
to the end of the telegraph line.

Part of the express route went by steamer from New
Orleans to Mobile. Then the express riders followed the
stage road to Montgomery, Charleston, and Richmond.
That allowed the Mobile newspapers to get the latest
developments of the war shortly after the New Orleans
papers.

“The arrival of the New Orleans boat yesterday
morning was watched for with intense anxiety,” the
Register reported of the excitement caused by the war.
“Crowds surrounded the post office at the opening of
the mails, and the bulletin boards were hemmed round
by eager readers” looking for the latest news of the
war.135

Express riders left from Mobile toward the end of
the telegraph lines in Richmond. This route allowed the
Register to get a bit of a break in reporting the signing of
the treaty ending the Mexican War.

Military officials carrying a copy of the treaty left
Veracruz on February 7, 1848, aboard the U.S. steamer
Iris and bound for Mobile. In charge of delivering the
dispatch to Washington was the New Orleans Delta’s
leading correspondent, James L. Freaner, an adventurer
who sometimes acted as an official dispatch carrier.
Kendall, meanwhile, tried to leave aboard the steamship
New Orleans at the same time in order to report the
treaty’s contents to his newspaper.

135 Green, Role of the Yankee, 68; Kendall, “Kendall,” 276-277;
The U.S. military commander at Veracruz wanted the official dispatches delivered first so he detained the *New Orleans* in port until February 8. Nevertheless, the faster *New Orleans* landed at the Crescent City at the same time the *Iris* sailed into Mobile on February 12.

Freaner refused to divulge the contents of his dispatches, but the *Register* found out enough to report the “general impression [is] they contained a treaty entered into between Gen. Scott and Mexican authorities.” Freaner left a few hours after his arrival for Washington. The *New Orleans Picayune* published a full account of the treaty, which the *Register* reprinted February 15.¹³⁶

Telegraph companies extended lines to Mobile on July 18, 1848, too late to be of any use in Mexican War coverage. The telegraph brought to Mobile newspapers the same profound changes it had been working on Eastern papers since 1844. The accelerated transmission of information emphasized general news over party politics and freed local papers from dependence on the Eastern press for news because Southern papers tended to share expenses in hiring a reporter to send news by telegraph.¹³⁷

The emphasis the telegraph placed on news stimulated the use of reporters. Shortly after the lines arrived in the Port City, the *Register* hired a regular city reporter, often just called “the local.”

Under the column heading of “Things about Town,” the local gave “brief accounts of all incidents worthy of note, or topics of interesting gossip, connected with our city. Our readers may be assured that no pains will be spared to make this department as complete and attractive as possible.” The local provided comment on the weather, complaints on the condition of the public square, news of ship arrivals, robberies, coroner’s inquests, city court sessions, and more.  

In 1847, Sanford had engaged the talents of one of Alabama’s premier, but erratic, scholars, Alexander Beaufort Meek. At the time, Meek served as U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Alabama and wrote editorials secretly for the Register. Meek began writing openly for the paper when he left office in 1849, the same year C. A. and C. H. Bradford bought out Samuel F. Wilson’s interest in the Mobile Register and Journal. The Bradfords and Sanford changed the name of the paper to the Mobile Daily Register. Within a year, the Bradfords quit the paper and Meek became part owner with Sanford.

The 6-foot, 4-inch tall, erect, and imposing Meek presented quite a contrast to the 5-foot, 9-inch tall Sanford, but the two men got along well. Meek arose from his room in the Rookery, as the Register building was called, at about 11 a.m. to begin his work. Taking a seat in an arm chair that had a wing for his writing materials, Meek sorted through a pile of newspapers from around the country. He clipped articles until he had about a dozen and then handed them to the printer.

As those articles were being set into type, Meek

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138 MDR November 21, 1850 2:4.
clipped other articles to fill the paper, leaving just enough room for the Register’s own leading editorial. When the printer told Meek that enough matter had been furnished for that day’s edition, Meek took a break. Back at work, he rapidly filled four or five pages of foolscap writing paper, about the size of a legal pad, composing the lead editorial.\textsuperscript{139}

Sanford arrived later at the Register office from home scrupulously dressed in a plain black suit. He had a halt in his walk because of a gouty foot, which his friends made fun of. Arriving at the Rookery, Sanford often found the words “cold crab” chalked on the door, a reference to Sanford’s fondness for eating chilled crab meat. On the lower part of the door were the rest of words: “It goes right down into the big toe.”

When Sanford had settled into his office, Meek collected his writing sheets and joined his senior partner in his office. In a deliberate fashion, Meek read the articles to Sanford, who considered the editorial’s language and bearing on the issues. Sanford, a “severe censor … would not permit a single word or expression to go into the hands of the printer until they had met with his entire approval. He carried this habit to the extreme verge of caution … .”\textsuperscript{140}

Sanford’s caution stemmed from the growing sectional conflict over slavery and the divisions created


\textsuperscript{140} Reynolds, Sketches of Mobile, 47, 24-26.
in the Democrat Party over how to respond to calls for abolition. Sanford favored compromise. He carefully excluded any articles from the Register that exclusively supported the Southern Rights wing of the Democrat Party, those who looked favorably on secession as a means of protecting slavery.

Sanford was the boss of Mobile’s regular Democrats and virtual head of the party in the state. He bitterly called the Southern Rights men “a little band of factionists that in my soul I hope will go over to the Whigs.”

The division in the Democrat Party allowed the Whig Party to dominate local elections. By 1850, Whig federal officeholders in Mobile included the U.S. representative, the Customs House director, the U.S. Marine Hospital director, and the U.S. District Court judge.

Whigs also captured local government offices. These included the city court judges, the Mobile County Probate Court judge, the majority of the Board of Aldermen and of the Common Council, and the mayor, who was Advertiser Editor Charles C. Langdon.

As a Whig, Langdon came under attack from both the regular Democrats at the Register and the Southern Rights wing at the Mobile Herald and Tribune.

Some Southerners proposed to meet in Nashville in June 1850 to oppose measures in the Compromise of 1850 that would prohibit the introduction of slavery into new territories acquired by the United States. Langdon questioned the need for the convention and worried that it was a move toward secession.143

The Register denied in March that the Nashville Convention was “the first step to disunion.” The paper said that “We have yet to see the first man who advocates the Convention as a measure of disunion … .”

The Register said the Advertiser and other Whig newspapers in the country disapproved of every Southern move to resist Northern attempts to limit slavery. The Register said Southerners may differ on the expediency of the Nashville Convention as a remedy, but they were united in their resistance.

Langdon demanded to know if the Register was charging the Advertiser with not being on the side of the South in its effort to resist the provisions of the Wilmot Proviso. The proviso would have prevented the extension of slavery into territories acquired as a result of the Mexican War.

The Register said the Advertiser showed no “congeniality of feeling with the indignant sentiment of the Southern people against the northern aggression.” The Register also said that Northern free-soil papers quoted the Advertiser for proof the South was divided over whether to restrict slavery from the newly acquired territories. Privately, however, Sanford wrote a friend that he disapproved of the Nashville Convention’s opposition to the admission of California as a free

143 MDR April 1, 1850 2:1; April 16, 1850 2:1.
state.\textsuperscript{144}

At the \textit{Herald and Tribune}, Langdon faced his old foe, Hamilton Ballentyne, now a member of the ultra-Southern Rights wing of the Democrat Party. The \textit{Herald and Tribune} claimed to be independent in its politics, free to “cuss and discuss” any man or measure.

By 1850, neither Sanford nor Langdon would speak to Ballentyne, which Ballentyne believed gave him the advantage to lecture Sanford and rap Langdon. Sanford never alluded to Ballentyne’s tongue lashings and would not permit Meek to do so. Langdon’s fondness for a literary duel, however, caused him to engage in a war of words in which he and Ballentyne “would die like heroes in the last ditch—particularly if the punch was strong and the enemy at a distance.”\textsuperscript{145}

Langdon’s unwavering support of the Union also earned him the hostility of a group of Southern Rights Whigs from Mobile known only as “The 27,” who questioned Langdon’s loyalty to the South and his stand on the Nashville Convention. In a letter to the \textit{Advertiser}, they wrote “that little or nothing has recently appeared in that paper particularly favorable to the rights and interests of the Slaveholding states.” They charged that the \textit{Advertiser} had published comments from Southerners that indicate a disposition not to resist any

\textsuperscript{144} MDR April 1, 1850 2:1; April 16, 1850 2:1; MDR Mobile 13, 1850 2:1; Clarence P. Denman, \textit{The Secession Movement in Alabama} (Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971 reprint of 1933 edition), 35.

\textsuperscript{145} Reynolds, \textit{Sketches of Mobile}, 28-29.
action by the federal government against slavery.\footnote{Thompson, “Southern Rights,” 132; Mobile Advertiser semi-weekly for the country, April 25, 1850 1:1; “Reply to the Twenty-Seven By The Editor of The Mobile Daily Advertiser,” (Mobile: S. B. Benjamin, 1850), 3.}

From April 25 to June 29, 1850, Langdon responded to “The 27” in 27 editorials in the \textit{Advertiser}. The editorials, later collected in pamphlet form, recounted Langdon’s long opposition to the Wilmot Proviso, his being a resident of Mobile since the 1830s, and his belief that the best course for the South was compromise with the North and not secession.

“I claim to have just as much regard for the ‘rights’ of the South, and to be as much devoted to her ‘interests’ as any of you ...” he told “The 27.” “Ardently attached to our glorious Union, I could not consent to take any step that could by possibility result in its destruction, as long as one spark of hope that the difficulties which now afflict the country might be satisfactorily adjusted, remained in my bosom.”\footnote{Alan S. Thompson, “Mobile, Alabama, 1850-1861: Economic, Political, Physical, and Population Characteristics,” (dissertation University of Alabama, 1979), 136-138; “Reply to The 27,” 7, 5, 23.}

Langdon told his questioning Whig fellows that party members had no right to question the course of the \textit{Advertiser} nor to dictate its tone and opinions. An editor’s first duty was to satisfy himself and form his opinions and maintain them, Langdon said in asserting independence from party control. Langdon suggested that if his friends didn’t like his opinions, then they could withdraw ads or stop subscriptions, “but let them...
not insult me by an attempt to dictate the course I should pursue.”

The main author of “The 27” article accusing Langdon was Hilary Foster, a partner in the firm of Boykin, McRae & Foster. The conflict between Foster and Langdon became personal and in the summer 1850 the two men fought a duel, but neither was seriously injured.

The Southern Rights Association, an organization of young, pro-secession men in the Democrat Party whose members included Meek, determined late in 1850 to defeat Langdon’s re-election as mayor. The association solicited interior planters to pressure Mobile cotton factors to support Langdon’s opposition. The threats implied that the Mobile businessmen would lose the planters’ business if they didn’t oppose Langdon.

Nevertheless, in December the voters returned Langdon to office by 12 votes. With that, the Whigs controlled most of the important offices in the city.

Southern Rights Democrats, with the uneasy cooperation of Thaddeus Sanford and the regular Democrats, gained some measure of success against Langdon and the Whigs in 1851. Democrats elected the U.S. representative, the mayor, nine of 14 aldermen, and all seven of the Common Council.

That marked the end of Sanford’s cooperation with the Southern Rights wing. He liked neither their tactics

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148 “Reply to The 27,” 3-4.
150 Thompson, “Characteristics,” 130, 132-135, 138-139; Amos, Cotton City, 223-224.
nor their purpose. For a short time in 1852, Sanford and
the Whigs worked together against the Southern Rights
Democrats to establish one of the South’s first common
school systems. Modeled on the government-run schools
favored by Whig politician Horace Mann, the Mobile
system would serve as a pattern for a statewide system.

Willis G. Clark, a 24-year-old lawyer in the office of
Campbell & Chandler, led the Whigs cooperating with
Sanford and the Democrats. Clark also was the editor of
the *Southern Magazine* and had been left in charge of the
*Advertiser* while an ailing Langdon left temporarily for
the North.  

Southern Rights Democrats dominated the Mobile
County Board of School Commissioners. They favored
the current system of giving tax money to free schools
run by churches or charitable organizations as a means
of public education.

By the 1850s, Mobile’s wage workers began
demanding schools that would better serve their
children. In response, the Southern Rights men proposed
selling Barton Academy, a magnificent three-story Greek
Revival school building on Government Street. They
wanted to invest the $40,000 expected from the sale and
use the interest income to subsidize schools instead of
charging students tuition.  

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151 *Memorial Record*, 523-529; Owen, *History of Alabama*, 3:336-
339; Marie Bankhead Owen, *The Story of Alabama* (New York :
13, 1898 4:2.

Clark and School Reform in Antebellum Mobile,” unpublished paper presented to Division F, American
The *Herald and Tribune* under Hamilton Ballentyne served as the chief organ for the Southern Rights faction. Ballentyne and other writers argued that Mobilians were too poor to maintain Barton Academy and that it was better to teach children under trees or in log houses than not have the funds to teach them at all.

Sanford at the *Register* and the youthful Clark at the *Advertiser* led the united forces against the sale of Barton Academy. They turned the threatened sale of the building into the central issue in their campaign to improve government-run education through common schools. Under Langdon, the *Advertiser* had already supported a system of common schools as in the North and under Clark’s guidance the newspaper outlined such a system for Mobile.

Candidates on five electoral tickets opposed the sale of Barton Academy. If voters split their votes among them, the Southern Rights Democrats might win the election with a just a minority of the total vote. To prevent that event, the Whigs and National Democrats agreed to a common “No Sale” ticket composed of four Whigs and four National Democrats. The ticket included Sanford, Langdon, and Sanford’s former partner C. A. Bradford.

Leaflets supporting the ticket flooded the city, and poll watchers made certain the Southern Rights men didn’t tamper with the ballots. Voters swept all eight candidates on the “No Sale” ticket into office August 2 by a vote of 2,225 to 244. When the new school board met in September, Sanford became president and Clark

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*Education Research Association, New Orleans, April 24, 1985, 5-6, 15; MDCR&P April 10, 1840 2:3.*
served as vice president.

In the 30 years since Sanford arrived in 1822, Mobile’s population had increased nearly tenfold to about 20,515. The city now stood as the fourth largest in the South, 27th largest in the nation. In terms of the value of exports, the port of Mobile ranked third behind New York and New Orleans.

That gave Sanford, as publisher of the Register, a wide influence in the business and political affairs of the nation. In 1854, however, the 64-year-old Sanford neared the end of his active life.

In that year he once again sold the Register to John Forsyth, who had returned to Mobile in 1853. President Franklin Pierce rewarded Sanford for his years of service to the Democrat Party with a patronage appointment as Collector of Customs for the Port of Mobile, a post he held until the end of the Civil War. To his successors Sanford left an influential and profitable newspaper.153

CHAPTER 5
Deadline for Disunion

When John Forsyth left Mobile in 1841 for Columbus, Georgia, to settle his father’s estate, he was just 29 years old and known mostly by his father’s reputation. In Columbus, Forsyth practiced law, owned part of the Columbus Times, served as the town’s postmaster, and as president of the Columbus Gas Light Association. He gained a military reputation as a third lieutenant in the Columbus Guards during the Mexican War, although the unit engaged in only a few skirmishes.

Forsyth returned to Mobile early in 1853 to build what he hoped would be a profitable sawmill. In the autumn of that year, however, his mill on Blakeley Island in front of the city burned to the ground in less than an hour.\footnote{MDR January 5, 1853 2:1; May 3, 1877 2:1; John H. Martin, Columbus, Geo., From Its Selection as a “Trading Town” in 1827 to Its Partial Destruction by Wilson’s Raid, in 1865. two parts (Columbus: Thomas Gilbert, Book Printer and Binder, 1875}
When Thaddeus Sanford and A. B. Meek offered the *Mobile Daily Register* for sale, Forsyth joined with John Y. Thompson and Jacob Harris to buy the paper on September 1, 1854. Poor health forced Thompson in November to sell his interest to Lewis A. Middleton, who had been an owner of the *Caduceus* and the *Mobile Herald* in the early 1840s.\(^{155}\)

For Forsyth, the *Register* served largely to further his political ambitions as he attempted to make his influence shine in the shadow of his father’s reputation. Although political affairs frequently took him away from the newspaper office, Forsyth nevertheless spoke through the columns of the *Register* as a leading voice of the Southern wing of the Democrat Party.

In the early 1850s, increasing hostility to Catholics, the foreign-born, and existing parties, gave rise to the American or Know Nothing, Party. Debates in Congress in the spring of 1854 on the Kansas-Nebraska question also caused much excitement in Alabama and gradually drove many of the state’s Whigs into the Know Nothing Party. The Whig Party began to disintegrate.

The Know Nothings grew rapidly in Alabama and most rapidly in Mobile where the party increased from 678 members in June to more than 3,000 by December. The party swept the city and county elections in August 1854. The *Mobile Advertiser*, by now the organ of the Know Nothings, praised the party for principles that it

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reprinted by Georgia Genealogical Reprints, 1972)1:131, 152, 166, 163; 2:57-58, 6-7, 37, 39; *MR&J* April 15, 1844 2:2.

\(^{155}\) *MDCR&P* October 4, 1841 2:1; *MR&J* May 19, 1842 2:1; *MDR* December 10, 1871 2:2; June 25, 1869 2:3; Lavanna, “South Alabama Newspapers,” 158.
said united the North and the South and stood for the protection of slavery.\footnote{156}

Charles C. Langdon, who served as mayor every year between 1849 and 1855, except for 1852 when the Democrats managed to capture City Hall, had joined his fellow Whigs in switching to the Know Nothings and became a leader in the party. Although Langdon had sold the \emph{Advertiser} in 1852, he continued to contribute to the newspaper’s columns as he led a campaign to purify the city based on his new party’s views.

Mayor Langdon and the Know Nothing aldermen and councilmen sought to force what they believed were American and Protestant values on Mobile’s foreign-born. They passed an ordinance prohibiting labor, business sales, dray hauling, and any unnecessary work by slaves on Sundays. The law exempted such essential services as steamboats, trains, ice houses, livery stables, milkmen, barbers, the gas works, and, of course, carriers delivering newspapers.\footnote{157}

Sometimes the Know Nothings resorted to violence against the city’s foreign-born, especially Irish and German Catholics who made up most of the foreigners. Nativists attacked Irishmen in the streets and four of them beat a Jesuit teacher from Spring Hill College, Father Nachon. The priest had been on his way to a

\footnote{156 Lewy Dorman, \emph{Party Politics in Alabama From 1850 through 1860}. (Wetumpka, Ala.: Wetumpka Printing Co., 1935), 100, 102-103; W. Darrell Overdyke, \emph{The Know-Nothing Party in the South} (Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 63; Thompson, “Characteristics,” 152-153; Amos, \emph{Cotton City}, 227; MDR December 15, 1855 2:l.}

\footnote{157 Amos, \emph{Cotton City}, 227.}
factory at Dog River to conduct Sunday services for the company’s Irish-born workers.

The Advertiser at first reported that “Romanist Irishmen” attacked Nachon for “an abuse of his sacred office.” Democrats blamed the Know Nothings for the beating and the Advertiser had to admit that it had no evidence to back its initial report.  

The Register now stood alone among the city’s four dailies in fighting such excesses. The Mobile Daily Advertiser and the Mobile Daily Tribune early declared themselves in favor of the Know Nothings. The Evening News maintained an independent path until November 6, 1855, when Know Nothings bought it and seated Langdon in the editorial chair.

Know Nothingism also infected the Register. When Lewis A. Middleton became secretary of the Alabama Council of the American Party, Forsyth and Jacob Harris forced Middleton to leave the Register.  

The Know Nothings appealed to Forsyth to join their party out of his sense of sectional loyalty. Forsyth brushed aside the overtures saying that he didn’t see how a secret order from the North could help the South. Nevertheless, the leaders of the Know Nothings attempted to give prestige to the order by reporting that

158 Thompson, “Southern Rights,” 38; Amos, Cotton City, 227-229.
159 Thompson, “Southern Rights,” 138; Dorman, Party Politics, 09; Luther N. Steward Jr., “John Forsyth,” Alabama Review14:2 (April, 1961), 102; Lavanna, “South Alabama Newspapers,” 151, 160-161, 158-159; Memorial Record, 2:165; MDR November 6, 1855 2:1; December 16, 1855 2:1; December 18, 1855 2:1; December 19, 1855 2:1.
Forsyth was a member. Forsyth had to deny a report in the Montgomery State Sentinel that he was the grand scribe of the American lodges in the state.\textsuperscript{160}

Although alone against the Know Nothing newspapers, the Register kept up a vigorous attack on the American Party, often ridiculing its secrecy, fear of foreigners and Catholics. “The Democracy has but one representative in this city, and in its good cause that representative finds no terror in numbers,” the Register said of itself. “It will speak out, even here, in the heart of the enemy’s camp, in the very seat and center of this monstrous delusion, in this spot, which has alone proved impenetrable to the rays of light and truth.”\textsuperscript{161}

Know Nothing city officials with the leadership of Mayor Jones H. Withers undertook another crusade to purify the city in 1856. The aldermen and council increased penalties on owners who hired out slaves and didn’t keep track of them. The city prohibited slaves and free blacks from meeting with each other or with certain whites. The Register charged Withers with being a latter-day Puritan witch hunter and accused him of being a dictator on the order of Oliver Cromwell.\textsuperscript{162}

Democrats across the state began preparing for the 1856 presidential election by organizing clubs and using the Register as a textbook to study political questions. They kept copies of the paper on file as a reference. The Know Nothings, however, began to disintegrate over sectional issues and slavery before the November

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{160} MDR December 15, 1855 2:1; Dorman, Party Politics, 101.} 
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{161} MDR December 6, 1855 2:1.} 
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{162} Thompson, “Characteristics,” 170-171; Thompson, “Southern Rights,” 139.}
election. Former Southern Rights Whigs and Know Nothings drifted into the Democrat Party, which was left without organized opposition.\textsuperscript{163}

The movement toward secession as a means to resist abolition now picked up speed. The parties had repressed secessionism in order to maintain unity, but with the Democrat Party standing alone, secessionists began to make themselves heard.

Fear of abolitionists, or suspected abolitionists, grew. The \textit{Register}, for example, called on Mobilians not to do business with the Cincinnati firm of Straight, Deming & Co., which did a large business in the South, including Mobile. The paper pointed out that one of the firm’s owners supported the activities of an abolitionist lawyer.\textsuperscript{164}

One incident in 1856 clearly demonstrates how sensitive citizens had become toward the issue of abolition and how political leaders drifted toward an extreme Southern Rights position. In that year, a pro-slavery mob drove William Strickland and his partner Edwin Upson out of Mobile for selling the wrong books.

Strickland came to Mobile from his native England as a youth in 1839. He invested his early savings from his job as a bookbinder in slaves and real estate. After the death of his employer, Strickland sold his slaves and real estate investments, and with the earnings accumulated by his wife, who worked as a milliner, he went, into the bookselling and stationery business for himself.


\textsuperscript{164} Dorman, Party Politics, 136; MDR April I, 1856 2:1.
Between 1844 and 1854, the firm grew into the largest in the city. In the latter year, Strickland took on a partner, Edwin Upson, to form Strickland and Co.

Strickland never meddled in politics and had few close friends outside of his wife and Upson. Upson, however, had many friends, including Charles C. Langdon. The Upson and Langdon families had been in business together in their hometown of Southington, Connecticut. In 1832, at age 18, Upson moved to Marion, Alabama, where his two brothers, Lauren and James, took over the markets of the Langdon brothers when the Langdons moved to Mobile.

Lauren Upson was admitted to the Alabama bar in the early 1840s and became a prominent Whig. He wrote articles for the *Mobile Advertiser* supporting the candidacy of Henry Clay for president. When Langdon, then owner of the *Advertiser*, became mayor, he invited Lauren Upson to become an associate editor. Lauren remained in that post until December 1851 when he left Alabama to become editor of the *Sacramento Union*.165

Strickland’s highly prosperous firm in 1850 bought the *Advertiser*’s job printing office and the following year began publishing the *Southern Parlor Magazine*, a monthly journal published in Mobile and in New Orleans, Charleston, Nashville, Macon, and Selma. The [165](#)

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32-page magazine devoted its space to literature, science, and improvement of the mind.\textsuperscript{166}

Strickland advertised heavily in the Mobile newspapers. In 1855, the \textit{Register} in one of the fluff pieces it occasionally did to promote the business of its advertisers, wrote “This well known house scarcely requires that editors should endorse the established fact that in their establishment as booksellers, stationers, printers, and book-binders, there is not an article of taste, beauty, or substance, that cannot readily be found.”

Within a year, the Register would forget those kind words, and William Strickland and Edwin Upson would be abandoned by their friends in the press to a mob.\textsuperscript{167}

In August 1856, a New Orleans doctor of “literary reputation” and pro-slavery sentiments dropped into Strickland’s store looking for something to read on a trip upriver. The doctor found a copy of Frederick Douglas’ \textit{Bondage and Freedom} and the \textit{Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s documentation of the depictions in her \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}. The doctor spread word that Strickland and Upson were selling abolitionist books and several other men called to see them.

Some friends warned Strickland on August 13 that the presence of the books had caused a great excitement against him, and that a mob was preparing to take him in hand. John H. Woodcock, a member of a self-constituted Vigilance Committee, told Strickland that the committee “had assumed the responsibility of

\textsuperscript{166} MDR November 26, 1850 3:2; July 11, 1851 4:1.
\textsuperscript{167} MDR November 16, 1855 3:1; Lavanna, “South Alabama Newspapers,” 160.
considering” his case.

The committee summoned Strickland and Upson for questioning that night at the Battle House hotel. A threatening crowd gathered around the hotel as the inquisition began. The mob freely discussed tar and feathers and a “light rope” for the two booksellers, but the influential men among the committee calmed the crowd and prevented violence.168

Strickland defended possessing the books by saying that in the course of business he constantly received books sent out by publishers. In this way, he said, he received the copies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Bondage and Freedom*. Strickland said he had two copies of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that were falling apart after being passed from friend to friend, including some in the room who were curious about the book.

When Strickland said he had given 50 copies as gifts, the committee became convinced that he was lying about the books accidentally being in the store. The committee found Strickland and Upson guilty of selling books of an “incendiary and insurrectionary character” and that the two men were “either in principle abolitionists, and anxious to propagate their faith on that subject among slaves and slave owners, or that they were unscrupulous speculators …”169

168 *New York Daily Times* September 30, 1856 4:3; Liberator October 10, 1856 1:5; Milwaukee Sunday Telegraph February 15, 1885, Upson papers; *New York Herald* August 23, 1856 7:1.

169 Liberator August 29, 1856 140:2; October 10, 1856 1:5; Milwaukee Sunday Telegraph February 15, 1885, Upson papers; National Intelligencer August 26, 1856 3:1; New York Daily Times September 30, 1856 4:3; Brewer, Alabama, Her History, 410-111.
No one on the Register came forward to defend the two men whose firm was one of the paper’s largest advertisers. Langdon did not come forward to defend Upson, whose brother had been his associate on the Advertiser and with whose family he had a long and continuing business relationship.

The police watched Strickland and Upson. Friends became concerned that the two might be turned over to a lynch mob before a scheduled city trial. Strickland wanted to stay and fight the matter out in court. But friends persuaded Strickland and Upson to flee. About noon August 15, Upson left the store as usual for dinner. Instead of going home, Upson made his way south out of the city to Choctaw Point. There in the woods near the lighthouse, Strickland joined him.

A fishing smack took the two men across the bay to Strickland’s summer residence, where Mrs. Strickland waited anxiously for them. After a hasty dinner, the two men took a horse and buggy and headed for the town of Blakeley where they took a stage coach to Montgomery, then a train to Atlanta. There they read in the newspapers about the “Great Excitement in Mobile about Strickland & Co.” The two men eventually made their way to New York.

When it became known in Mobile that Strickland and Upson had fled, the city authorities took possession of their store out of fear that a mob might burn it. Officials permitted Mrs. Strickland to open the store for 10 days to sell off the stock. But a mob broke into the store, stealing or ruining much of the $50,000 worth of stock.

An attorney trusted to collect accounts due the firm gathered about $25,000 and then ran off to Texas with
the money. Other persons with open accounts used the incident as a reason not to pay men who were accused of being abolitionists.

Mrs. Strickland wrote her husband to “make up your mind that you are ruined. No person could conceive the possibility of so bitter, so unrelenting a hatred. Some days it is not safe for me to go to town. I shall go if they hang me on the first lamp post. It seems that any physical suffering I might endure could not compare with the mental anxiety I now suffer.”

She also noted that the Evening News discovered that the bookstore had sold “a copy of the Planter’s Victim and old Mr. Langdon is reporting it. There seem to be no friends, no kindly feeling, at least amongst those whose friendship could avail.”

The Strickland affair became a cause célèbre among abolitionist newspapers of the North, a state of affairs that did not please Upson. “The folks in this part of the world are determined to publish us,” he wrote a friend in Mobile. “I have tried to prevent it. I have no sympathy with canting abolitionists and to call me an abolitionist is the basest of slander.” Nevertheless, the story of the incident was widely published in such journals as the National Anti-Slavery Standard, the

Liberator, and others.\footnote{Letter from Edwin Upson to S. H. McMaster of Mobile, September 3, 1856, in the possession of Dr. Helen R. Upson.}

The \textit{New York Daily Times} considered the incident purposefully contrived to entrap Strickland and Upson. After all, the newspaper said, although officials charged the booksellers with being incendiaries, no charges were ever brought against those who bought the books. The \textit{New York Herald} linked the incident with the 1856 presidential election and said it may have been designed to inflame political emotions.

Indeed, the day before Strickland and Upson fled Mobile, a mob hung a well-dressed effigy of U.S. Representative Percy Walker of Mobile by the neck between two telegraph poles across Royal and St. Francis streets. Walker had repudiated the Know Nothing Party, by which he had been elected, and gone over to the Democrats.\footnote{\textit{New York Daily Times} September 30, 1856 4:3; \textit{New York Herald} August 25, 1856 4:3; August 23, 1856 7:1.}

The politics of slavery and the presidential election of 1856 undoubtedly excited feelings against Strickland and Upson. John Forsyth became heavily involved in those politics as he served as a delegate from Alabama to the Democrat Party’s National Convention in Cincinnati.

The Alabama delegation supported President Franklin Pierce, until after 14 ballots it became clear that Pierce could not win. On the 15th ballot the delegation switched its support to Stephen A. Douglas. When it became apparent that James Buchanan would be nominated, the Alabama delegates threw in their support, too. In return for Forsyth’s loyalty, President
Pierce six weeks later appointed him to replace James Gadsden as U.S. minister to Mexico.\textsuperscript{173}

Forsyth prepared to leave for Mexico in October. He told the readers of the \textit{Register} that he regretted leaving the country “at a moment when the voice and arm of every true son is needed in the great battle for Constitutional principles and States Rights which now shakes the country.”

He urged that “the South ought not to submit” to the election of the “Black Republican” presidential candidate John C. Fremont. “While I would not, for the right arm which guides this pen, raise one finger against the Union, disunion has no terrors for me,” he said.

Forsyth made no immediate arrangement for someone to take over his editorial chair. For the time being, he left G. Bailey in charge. Bailey had directed the editorial department before in Forsyth’s many absences. In December, the colorful, but highly erratic and alcoholic, Theodore O’ Hara took over the chores of editorial writing.\textsuperscript{174}

In Mexico, Forsyth sought to improve strained relations with the United States, but he sometimes made matters worse by dealing with various Mexican political factions. By February 1857, however, he had managed to negotiate treaties that would improve trade and adjust outstanding claims between the countries.

President Pierce decided to leave approval of the treaties to incoming President James Buchanan. Lewis Cass, Buchanan’s secretary of state, rejected the treaties.

\textsuperscript{173} Steward, “John Forsyth,” 102, 104; Chestnut, “John Forsyth,” 10-11.
\textsuperscript{174} \textit{New York Times} October 6, 1856 1:6.
and told Forsyth to renegotiate their terms. Domestic turmoil in Mexico prevented Forsyth from doing so and Cass severely reprimanded him.\textsuperscript{175}

At this point, Forsyth’s efforts became entangled in U.S. domestic politics. Two U.S. companies vied in the summer of 1857 for the right to build a railroad connecting the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean across the narrow band of land in southern Mexico.

The Mexican government in 1853 agreed to allow the Tehuantepec Co., headed by Colonel A. G. Sloo of New York to build the railroad. A second set of promoters from New Orleans challenged Sloo for the right to build the rail line. U.S. Senators Judah P. Benjamin and John Slidell, who was also the editor of the \textit{New Orleans Delta}, headed up the second group.

Forsyth supported Sloo with the Mexican government. Benjamin and Slidell had the backing of President Buchanan and lots of cash to spread around to Mexican officials. In September, the government granted the two Louisiana men the right to build the railroad.\textsuperscript{176}

Forsyth’s efforts to conclude a treaty with Mexico, meanwhile, fell apart and he angrily suspended diplomatic relations in June 1858. Buchanan ordered Forsyth home to show the Mexican government the seriousness of the breakdown. Buchanan also saw it as a way to get rid of the minister who had worked against the interests of Buchanan’s supporters. Forsyth and his family left Mexico City and arrived in Mobile in


November.

Forsyth went to Washington to report to Buchanan. But the president put him off, making it appear that Buchanan disapproved of Forsyth’s actions in Mexico, which he did. Buchanan referred publicly to Forsyth as “the late minister to Mexico.”

The New York Times criticized Forsyth for negotiating treaties “only fit for the official waste basket.” The New York Herald and the Washington Constitution also criticized his ministry as irresponsible. Forsyth angrily resigned and returned home.177

Forsyth turned his efforts toward presidential politics and stopping the Southern movement toward secession. Formerly an ardent admirer of William L. Yancey, the Alabama fire-eater, Forsyth in 1859 supported Stephen Douglas of Illinois as the only man who would approve the slavery rights demanded by the South and still get votes outside the slave states.178

Forsyth’s backing of the Little Giant came in part because of Douglas’ support in getting federal land grants in 1850 to aid construction of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. By the late 1840s, the city’s businessmen had become alarmed at the decline of commerce in the port city. They hoped that building a railroad to the Ohio River would stimulate trade between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico.

That effort coincided with Douglas’ support of interests seeking federal land grants for the Illinois Central Railroad, which would connect with the M&O. Douglas also saw the railroads as uniting North and South, and with the cooperation of U.S. Senator William R. King of Alabama secured passage of the land grants by Congress.\textsuperscript{179}

Mobile needed entrepreneurs to develop its economy, but the profits to be gained from cotton production drained off the needed capital. That’s one of the reasons the M&O found it hard to raise the funds for construction. Forsyth wrote frequently in support of state aid for railroad construction and for removal of obstructions in Mobile Bay, displaying a highly Whiggish style of Democrat Party politics.

By 1856, less than half of the M&O’s projected 500 miles had been built. The entire road was not completed until April 1861 when it was too late to be of use to Mobile in reaching Midwestern markets.\textsuperscript{180}

Mobile’s businesses largely catered to distant U.S. markets and world markets rather than serving local markets. This helps explain why the city’s leaders supported the construction of the M&O and Douglas’ campaign for the presidency.

Mobile’s businessmen needed federal money for internal improvements, such as for the railroad and river dredging, to keep the port competitive and commerce


\textsuperscript{180} \textit{DR} February 4, 1854 2:1, February 21, 1854 2:1, clippings in MMA.
moving. Secession and civil war threatened to disrupt the flow of public funds and distant trade. A Douglas presidency seemed to Mobile merchants to offer the best hope of avoiding such disruption.

Forsyth promoted Douglas’ candidacy with the aid in Louisiana of Pierre Soule, who had been Sloo’s attorney in the Mexican railroad negotiations, and Colonel John J. Seibels, founder of the Montgomery Confederation. In a series of pamphlets, Forsyth outlined the candidate’s non-intervention platform as a continuation of the Illinois debates with Abraham Lincoln.

William F. Samford, a fire-eater who ran unsuccessfully for governor on a Yancey platform, responded for the fire-eaters in his own pamphlets and through the columns of the Mobile Mercury, an extreme Southern Rights newspaper.181

While Forsyth traveled about the South trying to garner support for Douglas, he left the Register in the hands of Henry Hotze. Hotze, a 25-year-old native of Switzerland, had become a naturalized U.S. citizen just four years before.

The Mobile Tribune, displaying its Southern Rights suspicion of anyone born outside the South, made an issue of Hotze’s nationality, although he had been in the United States since he was a child. The Tribune accused him of “being nothing but a foreigner and therefore having no business with American politics … .”

Hotze responded that he “humbly pleads guilty to that crime” of having been born outside the United

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States, but that he corrected “his fault as early as practicable after he was born, by coming to the South, he believes, at a much more youthful age than the Tribune’s editor.”  

Forsyth credited Hotze’s lively writing with helping Douglas gain support in Alabama and that the newspaper “is largely indebted to his industrious and instructed pen for the rapid growth of the Register in the public confidence and appreciation.”  

Forsyth decided to test the success of his campaign for Douglas by running for the Alabama House in 1859 on a Douglas platform. The boisterous campaign used brass bands playing field music and drew large crowds to such local watering holes as Asa’s, the Battle, Ensign’s, Bowzer’s, and Dominick’s. By night, deafening shouts could be heard around bonfire rallies. Skyrockets and roman candles lit the sky. 

The Southern Rights candidate denounced Forsyth and his support of Douglas so viciously that Forsyth hinted he was ready to fight a duel. That proved unnecessary and the voters sent Forsyth to the Legislature.  

Forsyth won the election, but Yancey men won control of the Democrat Party machinery. When Mobile County Democrats met after the legislative election to choose delegates to the January 1860 state convention in

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182 Milton, Eve of Conflict, 392; DR May 11, 1887 2:2; DR May 8, 1860 2:2.
183 MDR April 3, 1860 2:1.
Montgomery, the Yancey forces controlled the meeting and selected the delegates. Forsyth led a walkout of Douglas Democrats, who chose their own delegates.

When the state convention met January 11, 1860, both the Douglas delegates and the Yancey delegates from Mobile County demanded to be seated. The convention compromised by seating both rival delegations.

Forsyth fought hard against his one-time mentor, but Yancey’s fire-eaters pushed through their platform for the national Democrat Convention, which was to meet in Charleston, South Carolina, in April. The fire-eaters demanded that the national platform include a plank to protect slavery. The state convention instructed the delegates to leave the national convention if the party didn’t accept the provision.185

Forsyth tried to forestall a bolt of Alabama delegates by supporting a suggestion of the Virginia Republican that a loyalty pledge be required of delegates to the Charleston convention to support the party’s nominees. “Will you abide the action of the Charleston Convention’?” he asked the Southern Rights extremists.

Fire-eater George Gayle of the Alabama newspaper Slaveholder, meanwhile, offered a $500 reward “to know how much John Forsyth [pays others] for lying for Douglas!!! We won’t take Forsyth’s word unless he is sworn—‘by the Eternal.’”

Forsyth took up the challenge. “We claim the reward,” he wrote. “Send down a check for the $500 and

the information sworn to is at your service.”  

Forsyth attended the Charleston convention both as a delegate and as a correspondent for the Register, sending telegraphic reports to the newspaper. The Platform Committee, controlled by fire-eaters, reported out a platform the Yancey men wanted but the convention rejected it.

The Alabama delegation, as instructed, walked out with others and met in a separate convention in Charleston. Both groups decided to postpone nominations and to meet again in June, the bolters on the 13th in Richmond and the regular Democrats on the 18th in Baltimore.

Back in Alabama, Forsyth called a strategy session of the state’s regular Democrats. They met in Mobile on May 7 and organized the National Democracy of Alabama, which met in Selma on June 4 to select a delegation to the Baltimore convention.

At the national convention they joined with other regular Democrats in nominating Douglas. The Yancey men, meanwhile, had formed the Constitutional Democrat Party and nominated John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. Another Southern group, composed chiefly of former Whigs, formed the Constitutional Union Party and nominated John Bell of Tennessee as its presidential candidate.

The Register served as Douglas’ flagship newspaper in the state, while the Montgomery Advertiser backed

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186 Milton, Eve of Conflict, 404; Chestnut, “John Forsyth,” 24; MDR April 18, 1860 2:2; April 17, 1860 2:2.
Breckinridge and the *Mobile Daily Advertiser* campaigned for Bell. During the summer of 1860, Stephen Douglas toured Alabama trying to assure the state that in the event of the election of Abraham Lincoln the South need not secede. Forsyth confessed to Douglas, however, that the storm of secession “rages to such a madness that it is beyond the control of those who raised it.”

The night before the presidential election, Douglas spoke in Mobile from the balcony of the County Courthouse. A huge crowd packed Government Street in front of the building. Torchlights gave a solemn effect to the upturned faces of the crowd as it listened while Douglas explained his belief that state’s rights would be more protected within the Union than without. Douglas spent the next day quietly. In the evening Douglas made his way to the *Register* office on Royal Street to await the telegraphic election returns.¹⁸⁸

The presence in Mobile of many northern- and foreign-born citizens, as well as business ties to the North, resulted in local electors giving their largest vote to Douglas, followed by Unionist John Bell. Telegraphic reports made it clear by mid-evening that Abraham Lincoln had been elected president.

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Forsyth prepared an editorial calling for a state convention to determine whether Alabama should remain in the Union. Douglas pleaded with Forsyth not to print the piece. Forsyth argued that pro-Union men could gain control of the state convention and prevent the state from seceding.

But Douglas said that if Union men couldn’t block a convention, then they couldn’t control it when it met. Unpersuaded, Forsyth had the editorial set in type for the next morning.\(^{189}\)

Douglas proved to be right. The secessionists quickly organized popular discontent to pry Alabama from the Union. A large meeting in Mobile on November 15 declared Lincoln’s election a virtual overthrow of the U.S. Constitution and called for Alabama to immediately withdraw from the Union.

The *Mobile Advertiser* supported cooperating with other Southern states to secede rather doing so separately. But the newspaper saw the only difference between Cooperationists and Separate Secessionists as being over the method of ending the Union.

The *Advertiser* on November 23 announced a slate of four candidates who favored Cooperation for the state secession convention. Two of the candidates, including Forsyth, declined nomination. Charles C. Langdon, meanwhile, refrained from involvement but criticized

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Forsyth and most of the other Douglas editors in the state now joined the cry for secession. Forsyth said the state should “cast about for a new union and means of safety.” Only the means needed to be determined. The \textit{Advertiser} believed that “If the Southern States could be persuaded generally to withdraw and form a new government … we do not see why a separation between the North and South should not be peaceably accomplished ….”\footnote{Durwood Long, “Unanimity and Disloyalty in Secessionist Alabama,” \textit{Civil War History} 11 (1965) 261-262; \textit{MDA} December 7, 1860 2:1.}

When the telegraph brought the news January 12, 1861, that the state convention had taken Alabama out of the Union, a huge crowd gathered around a “secession pole” at the foot of Government Street and hoisted the Southern flag amid shouts and the thunder of cannon. Military units paraded in the streets and fired continuous volleys of musketry in Bienville Square.

The celebration continued long into the night with bonfires of tar-barrels illuminating every corner of Government Street. Rockets flew into the night sky and firecrackers exploded in the streets.\footnote{P. J. Staudenraus (ed.) \textit{The Secession Crisis, 1860-1861} (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1963), 33-34.}

The early enthusiasm for secession didn’t betray any knowledge of the hard days ahead for both the South and the Register. Forsyth, however, wrote his
friend Douglas that he knew “a giant union could not be broken without a giant struggle.”

The Confederate government appointed Forsyth on February 27, 1861, as one of three peace commissioners to go to Washington to seek recognition of the Southern government. Because meeting with the commission would be tantamount to recognizing the Confederacy as a legitimate government, federal officials refused to see the three commissioners.193

Returning to Mobile, Forsyth told his fellow citizens of the failure of his mission. Forsyth stood on the balcony of the city’s leading hotel and addressed a sea of upturned faces. The views he offered “brooked no delay or temporizing; and, as he spoke, in vein of fiery elegance, shouts and yells of defiant approval rose in full swell of a thousand voices.” The name of the hotel from which Forsyth spoke, the Battle House, now seemed to predict the fate of the nation.194

194 Thomas Cooper DeLeon, Four Years in Rebel Capitals: an Inside View of Life in the Southern Confederacy, from Birth to Death. From Original Notes Collected in the Years 1861 to 1865 (Mobile: Gossip Printing Co., 1890), 55.
After the secession celebrations died down, the hard work of preparing for war began. A thousand slave laborers began felling magnificent oaks and magnolias to the west of the city for a broad belt of earthworks to defend Mobile against a Yankee attack.

State troops took possession of Fort Morgan on Mobile Point and Fort Gaines on Dauphin Island and strengthened their defenses to guard the entrance to Mobile Bay. At Spanish Fort and Blakeley on the eastern shore at the head of the bay and opposite Mobile, laborers threw up earthworks to guard against attack from the east.

As the war opened, Mobile had four daily morning newspapers: the Register, the Advertiser, the Tribune, and the Mercury. The Advertiser published an evening edition called the Evening News, and the Tribune published an evening edition called the Telegraph. In an odd of turn of events, the Mercury, a mouthpiece of the fire-eaters, perished in the early summer of 1861 just as the Southern Confederacy it had fought so hard to establish
came to life.

In June, the *Register* and the *Advertiser*, who for so long had fought each other from opposite political camps, combined for an uncertain future. The uneasiness of the union was displayed in the newspaper’s name which alternated from month to month. For one month the paper styled itself the *Mobile Advertiser and Register* and on the following month changed to the *Mobile Register and Advertiser*. The publishers continued to alternate the name for about a year.

Regardless of the name, combining the two major dailies of the largest city in the state established the *Advertiser and Register* as Alabama’s leading newspaper. The *Eutaw Whig and Observer* said, “The *Advertiser and Register* is now the strongest paper in the State, editorially, financially, and in circulation.”

Owners John Forsyth and Willis G. Clark made the *Register* the newspaper Southerners most often turned to for information about the war.¹⁹⁵

With his political connections and his reputation as a journalist, Forsyth tapped sources of information not generally available to other reporters. He had an intimate friendship with many Confederate commanders and with President Jefferson Davis.

Forsyth had a particularly close friendship with General Braxton Bragg, whose brother, John Bragg, was a judge in Mobile and served for a short time as an

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associate editor of the *Register*. Forsyth remained loyal to the general throughout the war and often overlooked Bragg’s shortcomings when defending his actions in the *Register*.196

The Civil War profoundly affected every aspect of newspapering. Most importantly, the war emphasized the role of the reporter and the accurate reporting of war news over the role of the editor and editorial writing.

The *Register* organized one of the Confederacy’s best systems of special correspondence by telegraph and mail, as well as a special express for news outside the Confederacy. The *Register* sent correspondents, called “specials,” to every major field of battle. News, which had begun to take over two or three columns on the front page during the secession crisis, now began to push all other matter aside.

The *Mobile Tribune*, which maintained that only its news coming from Confederate officials was reliable, criticized the *Register’s* system of using reporters in the field. The *Tribune* said that it had agents in Richmond at the seat of government to obtain accurate accounts. The *Tribune* said the *Register’s* specials “do nothing more than to gather up rumors and embellish them for the purpose of creating sensations. We should have had a special reporter for this paper, if we had not been well aware of these facts.”

The *Register* hinted that the *Tribune’s* reason for not having specials had more to do with finances than any claims to accuracy. The *Register* said it also got the

official dispatches by the Associated Press, but the specials “cost us more by considerable.”

The account of the battle of Manassas, for example, cost in telegraph tolls nearly twice the amount paid each week to the AP, the paper said. “Yet we find ample return, in the extraordinary demand for all our editions.” Eventually, the Tribune also relied on special correspondents for its reporting efforts.197

As the Union Fleet blockaded the Southern coasts in 1861, Forsyth headed to New Orleans in September to report on the Crescent City’s defenses. The commanders there, he found, were doing the best they could with their limited resources.

When Union forces attacked the upper region of the Mississippi River in early 1862 in an attempt to divide the Confederacy in two, reporters hustled toward Nashville. There Peter W. Alexander for the Register and Sam Reid for the Tribune covered the fall of forts Henry and Donelson into Union hands and the following Confederate retreat from Nashville.198

A woman reporter who signed herself “Virginia” covered the historic first battle of ironclads for the Register. “Virginia,” Virginia Gordan, the daughter of a well-to-do banker and a member of Norfolk’s social elite, had been contributing a series of letters giving war news since August 1861.

Watching as the ironclad Virginia slipped its mooring and steamed down the Elizabeth River into Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862, she wrote, “by the noontide sun of the last Saturday, our Virginia, the

197 MA&R July 25, 1861 1:5.
198 Andrews, South Reports, 131-132, 134, 148, 156.
quondam *Merrimac*, cast loose from her mooring at the Norfolk Navy Yard and went, attended by three gunboats gliding quietly through our waters down to Hampton Roads.”

The *Register* had trouble getting the news out to the rest of the South as the Union Navy prepared to capture New Orleans. A federal naval squadron under Captain David G. Farragut battled its way up the Mississippi River past forts Jackson and St. Philip on the night of April 24, 1862. Telegraph operators in New Orleans quickly flashed the news to Mobile where the *Register* reported that the South’s largest city lay open to the federal fleet.

Military censors at Mobile, over the *Register’s* protest, attempted to block transmission of the news elsewhere. Every report had to be shown to the general in command in Mobile before it was put into type. Such censorship remained a problem throughout the war.

When it suited their purposes, however, Confederate commanders could be obliging to the *Register*. In the fall of 1862, General Braxton Bragg invaded Kentucky in the hope of drawing the Union army out of Tennessee. He planned elaborate ceremonies in Frankfort inaugurating a pro-Southern provisional governor of Kentucky and sent for his close friend John Forsyth to record the event.

Forsyth began to chase Bragg’s army heading first

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to Atlanta, and then to Chattanooga. He arrived at the Tennessee city September 8, but Bragg’s army had left 10 days before. Forsyth wrote that he left Chattanooga “very unwell, and in a few days became so ill that it was with difficulty I could keep in the saddle.” Over the next week his health improved. On the evening of September 20, near Cav’s City, a company of the 7th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Cavalry “dashed upon us at full speed,” capturing Forsyth and his companions.

A few days later, Bragg arranged Forsyth’s exchange. Forsyth reported that “My unwilling visit to the Federal camp cost me a valuable servant, two horses, my arms, and most of my clothes.” After two more days of hard riding, he caught up with Bragg.201

After he was in the Confederate camp, Forsyth organized a corps of printers with presses, types, and transportation for a mobile newspaper office to travel with the army. He named the paper Bragg’s Army Register.

He also wrote a proclamation for Bragg addressed “To the People of the Northwest,” which related their common concerns with the Confederacy and urged Kentuckians to join the South. The Kentuckians, however, didn’t respond to Forsyth’s pleas.202

A month after the Kentucky campaign, Forsyth wrote a complete report of Bragg’s expedition into

201 MA&R September 6, 1862 1:5; MA&R October 9, 1862 2:4; October 14, 1862 1:4; October 22, 1862 2:2; Andrews, South Reports, 241-2112; Stanley Horn, The Army of Tennessee (New York, 1941), 177-178.
202 MR&A October 14, 1862 1:4; Horn, Army of Tennessee, 177-178; Andrews, South Reports, 242.
Kentucky. Published over his “Press” byline in the Confederacy’s major newspapers, it provoked much criticism from Southern editors who found it far too generous to Bragg.203

One battle during the Kentucky campaign, that at Perryville, unsettled Forsyth. “All my conceptions of all the hurrah and din and dust of battle were confounded by the cool, business-like operations going on before me,” he wrote.

“Those badly clothed, some shoeless dirty and ragged-looking men walked into the harvest of death before them with all the composure and much less of the bustle that a merchant would exhibit in walking to his countingroom after breakfast. They had not advanced fifty yards before the enemy artillery—before that firing at random—opened with all their fury. In a few moments the sharp, cutting sound of musketry rolled along the line … For nearly two hours our brave troops stood that ground receiving and delivering the deadliest volleys.”204

To cover such news from the battlefields, the newspaper equipped reporters with a horse, spyglass, writing materials, and other things they needed for the field. Some reporters were already soldiers, but if not, they usually found that a staff appointment gave them access to army news.

Register correspondents Felix Gregory De Fontaine held the rank of major. Dr. W. G. Shepardson served as an army scout attached to the Army of Virginia. Albert J. Street served as the private secretary of General Slack of

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204 Andrews, *South Reports*, 244; MA&R November 9, 1862 2:2.
Missouri.\textsuperscript{205}

Since the correspondents often reported for more than one newspaper, they could make good pay. Before New Orleans fell into Union hands, Sam C. Reid received $25 a week from The New Orleans Picayune. After the capture of the Crescent City, Reid arranged to write for the Register at $30 a week and got another $20 a week from the Montgomery Advertiser. Reid later switched to being a correspondent for the Mobile Tribune at $20 a week. Confederate currency inflation pushed his weekly salary for the Tribune to $100 plus an allowance for horse feed. Over 30 months he earned about $12,000 from all his employers.\textsuperscript{206}

For his pay, a reporter faced many hardships. He spent most of the day observing a battle then wrote his report and filed it at the nearest telegraph station or railhead, often traveling many miles to do so. Then he headed back to the battlefield and maybe some rest before beginning another day.

On the north side of the Cumberland Gap on the night of October 1, 1862, Sam C. Reid composed his report to the Register by the flickering light of a one-inch candle. “I am writing you with my back against a tree, and with my knees for a desk on which to rest my portfolio—a most tiresome and unpleasant

\textsuperscript{205} MDA&R May 17, 1864 2:1; May 22, 1862 2:1; Andrews, South Reports, 48-49; Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (eds.) Dictionary of American Biography, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928-58) 5: 196.

\textsuperscript{206} Andrews, South Reports, 48-49, 233-234.
position … .”

Reporters, like soldiers, sometimes suffered capture. Forsyth spent a few days in federal hands when he tried to catch up to Bragg. Albert Street spent two weeks in a Northern prison and W. G. Shepardson served time in a Roanoke Island prison. All were eventually paroled and resumed their correspondence.

Suffering along with Confederate troops made the Register’s correspondents sensitive to the needs of the ordinary soldier. Alexander, in one of his letters to the Register, told of how the men of General Lee’s army left the banks of the James River fighting pitched battles and then marched to another battlefield to once again face the enemy: “And let it always be remembered to their honor, that of the men who performed this wonderful feat, one-fifth of them were barefooted, one-half of them in rags, and the whole of them half famished.”

The men left everything behind that could slow them down, including their cooking utensils. The army’s supplies lines couldn’t keep up and “it was not unusual to see a company of starving men have a barrel of flour distributed to them, which it was utterly impossible for them to convert into bread with the means and the time allowed to them. They could not procure even a piece of plank or a corn or flour sack, upon which to work up their dough.”

Reporters often had to deal with military censorship when they were ready to transmit their stories. Almost from the beginning Confederate officials began trying to

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207 MA&R May 22, 1862 2:1; October 4, 1862 1:4; Oct. 15, 1862 1:4; May 17, 1864 2:1 and 1:5; Andrews, South Reports, 242.
limit what could be sent over the telegraph lines.

“It is certainly a circumstance to be much deplored,” the Register complained in June 1861, “that at this time, when public interest is so profoundly absorbed in military operations, the authorities should esteem it politic to cut off our sources of information by strict surveillance of the telegraph.”

The editor acknowledged the necessity of official control of the telegraph, but asked that the authority be used with some discretion. Officials also cut off reports that could do no harm to the Confederate cause, the Register complained.209

Samuel C. Reid had trouble from both the military and his boss at the newspaper. Reid had an unending hostility toward General Braxton Bragg, the close friend of John Forsyth. Bragg and Reid had several run-ins.

In 1862, Bragg refused Reid permission to accompany his army’s invasion of Kentucky and in retaliation Reid wrote a sharp attack on Bragg that the Charleston Mercury published. Reid didn’t send the article to the Register because he knew Forsyth would never publish it. Because of Reid’s attitude toward Bragg, Forsyth ordered that none of Reid’s reports be published until he inspected them.

When Reid’s account of the battle of Murfreesboro in January 1863 failed to mention Bragg’s participation, the Register called the report “graphic and interesting … however, it has one blemish. The chief actor in the brilliant and bloody scene does not appear. It is the play of Hamlet with the part of Hamlet left out … the Confederate forces did have a leader and

209 MA&R June 8, 1861 1:4.
commander-in-chief on that great occasion, and that his name was Braxton Bragg.”  

After getting immediate reports filed over the telegraph, the correspondents often then composed lengthier accounts that they mailed to the Register. But like the telegraph, the Post Office Department gave military messages priority over private letters.  

The Register complained in February 1863 that mail from Richmond arrived once in every five days. “The Confederate postal carrying department is in a state bordering on chaos,” it said.  

In some cases perhaps it was just as well that the news didn’t reach the Register because it had increasingly less space. The impossibility of getting paper of the proper size forced the Register to cut the paper from eight columns a page to seven columns a page.  

The poor lines of supply were due in part to the Confederate government taking charge of the steamboats and giving preference to military cargo. That delayed the Register’s paper shipped from Montgomery and Atlanta.  

In November 1862, the Register complained that steamboat charges for paper shipped from Montgomery were higher than for paper shipped from Atlanta. Although S. H. Goetzel of Mobile manufactured writing paper, locally produced printing paper was not

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210 Andrews, South Reports, 236, 337, 341, 537; MA&R January 8, 1863 2: 1.  
211 MR&A February 12, 1863 2:1; Andrews, South Reports, 480.
By June 1862, the *Register* cut its normal four-page issues to just two pages. Ads took up the first three columns on page one and the last two columns on the second page. News of the war, editorial comment, and correspondence to the paper filled the other nine columns available.

The reduction in the number of columns and the number of pages typified most of the newspapers of the Confederacy faced with wartime shortages. But the *Register* and the other Mobile newspapers were more fortunate than most other newspapers in many respects. By January 1863, the *Register* published a full four-page newspaper on Sundays. The *Register* and its evening edition, the *Evening News*, also published two editions a day, as did the competing *Mobile Tribune* and its evening edition, the *Mobile Evening Telegraph*. They issued third editions and extras if important war news warranted.

The draining off of men and boys for the war effort, increasing labor costs, and rising telegraph tolls further constricted the newspaper’s operation. “One of our carriers has caught the prevailing military infection and has deserted his newspaper route for the more exciting round of the camp and field,” the newspaper notified its subscribers early in the war.

The *Register*’s production costs jumped $9,000 a year when the city’s printers increased their rates 25 percent.

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212 *MA&R* June 1861; June 1862; July 6, 1862; August 15, 1862 1:3; November 15, 1862 2:1; Lavanna, “South Alabama Newspapers,” 90, 169.

in November 1863. In the next six months, the paper’s operating costs soared to $1,000 a day. While newspapers in Atlanta, Richmond, Selma, and Montgomery sold for 25 cents a copy, the Register managed to keep its price down to 15 cents a copy for the daily and 20 cents a copy for the Sunday edition.214

Prices inflated so rapidly in the latter years of the war that the Register refused to accept subscriptions for longer than six months. Subscriptions that had been $10 a year in 1862 rose to more than $100 a year by March 1865.

The paper also found it impractical to send someone into the interior to collect subscription debts as had been done before the war. John Forsyth’s brother, Robert, traveled up the Mobile and Ohio Railroad line to collect accounts due and take new subscriptions. Two months later he returned having collected only one-third of the bills he carried. That barely paid the cost of collecting the accounts. “The result of the whole is, that if anybody wants the Mobile Register and Advertiser or the Evening News, outside of town, they have got to send the money for it,” the paper said.215

The number of ads had been reduced first by the secession crisis, as businessmen worried about the future, and then by the war and the limitations it caused. But circulations soared.

In February 1861, the Daily Advertiser’s circulation

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214 MDA January 23, 1861 2:1; MDA&R October 16, 1863 2:1; November 18, 1863 2:1; Andrews, South Reports, 43-44.
215 MA&R June 9, 1861 2:1; MR&A August 18, 1861 2:1; August 2, 1862 1:1; April 9, 1863 2:1 2:1; Lavanna, “South Alabama Newspapers,” 90.
climbed over the previous three months by 20 percent. The weekly edition increased 15 percent and the late edition, the Evening News, jumped a whopping 75 percent. To handle its increased circulation, the Advertiser acquired a small cylinder power press that could make 2,500 impressions an hour.\textsuperscript{216}

Two years later, with the Advertiser and Register now combined, the newspaper’s type became severely worn and one press broke down. Despite wartime shortages, the Register got both new type and a news press.

But, the Register informed its readers in June 1863, “Before we could possibly get our new engine in working trim, our old one, which has been greatly overtasked by the enormous pressure upon us for the last two years, gave way, and we were compelled to resort to negro power, to work off the news of yesterday.” The task kept the hands of six slaves constantly at the wheels of the press.\textsuperscript{217}

Military censorship, transmission of stories, supply shortages, rising costs, and getting competent correspondents were common problems all Southern publishers faced. For that reason, Register co-owner Willis G. Clark joined other Southern editors in organizing a cooperative press association along the lines of the Northern Associated Press.

Joseph Clisby, editor of the Macon Telegraph in Georgia, summoned the editor of each Confederate daily newspaper to meet in Augusta, Georgia, February 4, 1863. There, the Southern editors formed the Press Association of the Confederate States of America. The

\textsuperscript{216} MDA February 10, 1861 2:1.

\textsuperscript{217} MA&R June 6, 1863 2:1; MDA&R June 9, 1863 2:1.
members called the organization by its abbreviation, PA, the reverse of the AP. The editors selected Clark as one of the PA’s directors.218

The Register tried to keep up morale at home as the military situation worsened in 1863. The newspaper regularly summarized the state of affairs in situation pieces. Under the headline, “How Goes The Fight,” the Register told its readers in May that “The horizon of war’ has brightened up immensely” since the last of April.

Two major Confederate defeats in July made the optimism ring hollow. The first was at Gettysburg where Peter W. Alexander turned in what has been pronounced as the best Southern newspaper account of the battle. Alexander’s story raised questions about General Robert E. Lee’s plan of battle and other Southern papers picked up the account.

The fall of Vicksburg on July 4 further worsened morale as thousands of paroled Alabama soldiers made their way home. The fall of Vicksburg came unexpectedly as the correspondents for the Mobile newspapers, who, along with the PA reporter, supplied the only news available about the situation, failed to indicate that the river town was in immediate danger of falling into Union hands.219

The Register, its counterparts in the city, and

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throughout the state ignored dissent and unrest at home. Except for making note of the occasional pardons offered deserters if they would return to their posts, the Register did not report on the political breakdown of the state, nor the growing gloom among the people.

The presence of many suffering soldiers paroled from Vicksburg and a lack of food and clothing in Mobile caused a large number of women to gather September 4, 1863, on Spring Hill Avenue and march into town. Carrying banners that read “Bread and Peace,” the women marched with knives and hatchets to Dauphin Street where they broke into stores to get whatever food or clothing they could.

Soldiers of the 17th Alabama Regiment refused orders to stop them. The women dispersed after the mayor promised to supply their needs, but more rioting broke out that night. The Confederate press suppressed news of the riot, but an informant for the New Orleans Era got word of the incident out and the Northern press cited it as evidence that the South was crumbling from within.  

During the last seven months of 1864, the war began to take its toll on correspondents just as it had on the soldiers and civilians. John Forsyth fell wounded in the hip May 12 during a federal charge on breastworks at the “Bloody Angle” in Spotsylvania, Virginia. Samuel C. Reid took ill in Charleston. Depressed over the falling fortunes of the Confederacy, Felix G. de Fontaine returned to Columbia, South Carolina.  

220 Daily Missouri Democrat October 6, 1863 2:4; McMillan, Disintegration, 45-46.
221 MDA&R May 28, 1864 1:6; Andrews, South Reports, 395, 477.
The reliability of news reports for most of the Confederate press declined as the military situation deteriorated. Reporters and editors turned to boosting morale. Nevertheless, the correspondents of the Register provided exceptional coverage of events.

Henry Watterson, who gained fame after the war as editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, realistically reported for the Register that the South had little chance of winning the Battle of Atlanta. Ben Lane Posey, an occasional reporter for the Register and a colonel of an Alabama regiment, pointed out that the Confederacy’s position in the West had become desperate.222

Late in 1864, the Charleston Courier praised Forsyth’s correspondents as “not equaled—certainly not surpassed in quantity and quality of communications—by any other journal on our exchange list.” The Courier editor further said that the Register’s “editors very properly select and prefer good competent correspondents, and let them write what they see, and know, and think of, and for themselves, and do not expect or desire them to take the cue from the editors and write up or down to a party or partisan bias or humor.”223

In August 1864, Union Admiral David G. Farragut steamed past Fort Morgan and into history as he damned the torpedoes and captured lower Mobile Bay. In a series of editorials, Forsyth sharply criticized Lieutenant Colonel John K. Williams of Mobile for the surrender of tiny Fort Powell, which guarded Grant’s

223 Quote from Andrews, South Reports, 536.
Pass in the Mississippi Sound. Forsyth called the minor action in the battle for the bay a “disgraceful surrender.”

The article so offended Williams that he sent Forsyth a letter “as usually precedes a challenge.” But Williams accepted a subsequent article as an apology from Forsyth and the editor was not forced to defend himself on the field of honor.\textsuperscript{224}

The Union Navy controlled Mobile Bay and the telegraph between Richmond and Mobile was out for most of the time between December 1864 and April 1865. The city grew increasingly isolated from what was left of the Confederacy.

Forsyth lost his perspective on events and resisted what daily became more obvious, the ultimate defeat of Southern forces. To boost morale, Forsyth wrote an editorial February 7, 1865, headlined, “Stand Like an Anvil.” A week later he presided over a mass meeting to drum up support for the war.\textsuperscript{225}

The 5,000 Confederate troops in the earthworks at Spanish Fort and Blakeley protecting Mobile from attack from the east were no match for the 45,000 Union troops thrown against them in April 1865. Spanish Fort fell first and then on April 9, 1865, the day General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Blakeley surrendered after a brief fight with the vastly superior federal force.

The garrisons of small earthwork forts guarding river passages in the Mobile Delta evacuated their

\textsuperscript{224} John K. Folmar (ed.), \textit{From That Terrible Field: Civil War Letters of James H. Williams, Twenty-First Alabama Infantry Volunteers} (University of Alabama Press, 1981), 175, 152.

positions April 11. The Confederate forces made rapid plans to depart Mobile and head for the interior of the state.

Willis G. Clark, already at Tuscaloosa, provided the newspaper’s last Civil War correspondence on a Yankee cavalry raid. Meanwhile, his partner packed up the best of the Register’s materials and four of five power presses. Accompanied by nine of his employees, Forsyth evacuated Mobile with the Confederate army.

Some of the printing presses from the city’s newspapers were loaded aboard the gunboat Morgan, commanded by Captain Joseph Fry and his cousin, John L. Rapier, a future owner of the Register. The Morgan took the presses up the Tombigbee River to Demopolis. Forsyth told those of his employees who decided to remain in Mobile to support themselves as best they could with the remaining power press, which had been dismantled for repair before the federal advance.226

On the afternoon of April 12, Union troops began landing on the western shore of Mobile Bay below the city. The mayor climbed aboard a carriage bearing a white flag and went down the Bay Road to formally surrender the city.

Shortly afterward, federal ships docked at the foot of Government Street and U.S. soldiers came marching off as a military band played. Federal troops once again raised the U.S. flag over the city’s public buildings and Mobile returned to the Union.227

226 Andrews, South Reports, 504; Letter from Regina Rapier, April 4, 1985, 1-2; MEN Oct. 10, 1865 1:1
CHAPTER 7
Resisting Reconstruction

John Forsyth and the Confederate forces who evacuated Mobile sought to escape the invading federal army by heading north up the Mobile and Ohio Railroad line. They didn’t go far as the collapse of the Confederacy soon became apparent.

At Citronelle, about 30 miles north of Mobile, on May 8, 1865, Confederate General Richard Taylor met U.S. General E. R. S. Canby, commander of federal troops in Mobile. Taylor, the only son of former President Zachary Taylor, surrendered the last Confederate forces in Alabama and Mississippi.

Through Taylor, Canby invited Forsyth to return to Mobile to take charge of the Register, as Forsyth recalled later, “because it was believed that we had some power to be influential in reconciling the people to the new order of things … .” But resuming publication of the Register proved not to be a simple matter.

One of the first orders U.S. Major General Gordon Granger issued in occupying Mobile authorized a former Union officer, E. O. Haile, to issue a loyal daily
newspaper. Granger approved Haile, a former reporter for the Portland, Maine, Eastern Argus, taking over the offices of the Mobile Advertiser and Register from which to publish his paper.

Haile issued the first edition of his Mobile Daily News, a single newsletter-sized sheet, on April 13, the day after federal troops occupied the city. He noted that “We have nothing to continue the paper with on hand and cannot go further in the enterprise until material can be obtained from abroad,” an indication of how thoroughly Forsyth had evacuated his business.\(^\text{228}\)

Haile had no intention of returning a potentially lucrative business to a former rebel. Confident in his ownership of the property, he sat down at 2 p.m. May 25, for dinner at the Battle House hotel with two friends from New Orleans. They were there to discuss the affairs of the paper, but they didn’t get a chance to finish their meal.

Within 15 minutes the building shook, plaster from the ceiling fell onto the table, the glass in the window shattered, and the venetian blinds crashed to the floor. Outside black smoke enveloped the city, turning day into night.

The sound of the violent and rapid explosions occurring less than a mile to the north of the Battle House made it clear that the U.S. powder magazine at

Lipscomb and Commerce streets had exploded with deadly fury.\textsuperscript{229}

Haile ran to the \textit{News} office nearby the Battle House where he found one of his reporters in the street. The explosions had thrown the man out of his chair on the second floor, across the room, down the stairs, and into the street.

Inside, the \textit{News} office at 12 S. Royal St., Haile found partitions knocked over, the windows shattered, and types scattered about on the floor. Haile and his printers got the newspaper office back in shape enough to issue a two-column extra by 5 p.m. with the news of the explosion.

The magazine explosion did what the war had not: brought physical destruction to the city. The explosion almost instantly levelled eight city blocks in the heavily travelled business and cotton-press district.

Horses fell dead in the street from the concussion and ships sank in the Mobile River as fiery steel and ammunition fragments rained down on them. Many of the 300 people killed were paroled ex-Confederates making their way home, freedmen drifting in from the plantations, and federal troops. The explosions damaged $728,892 in property.\textsuperscript{230}

The destruction caused by the magazine explosion must have further lowered Forsyth’s spirits. He had learned that Haile would strain “every nerve of influence he could exert to keep us out of our property

\textsuperscript{229} MDN Extra May 25, 1865, Museum of the City of Mobile.
and convert it to his private and permanent use."

Forsyth lamented that the war swept away all his sources of support except for the newspaper. He had no money even “to go to market, with.” For two months, Forsyth and Clark lived “this agreeable life, while meantime from our residence we nightly saw the windows of the Register and Advertiser office brilliantly lighted up, and our office doing a smashing business, the profits of which were rolling into Mr. Haile’s pockets.”

The military authorities in Mobile decided they had no further use for the Register office and the federal civil authorities decided the Treasury Department had no claim on the office as contraband. Haile still tried to use his influence to hang onto the paper. He accused Forsyth and Clark of bribing the Treasury officer to decide in their favor. He had the military headquarters in New Orleans stop the proceedings and send the case back to the Crescent City where it already had been twice decided in favor of Forsyth and Clark.

Haile then went to Washington to file charges against the Treasury officer for depriving him of his property worth $30,000. The issue became so heated that Haile offered a challenge that he was ready “to meet anybody on any field, legal or otherwise” to settle the matter.231

A duel never came about, however, as in July Haile moved the Daily News office one door north to 10 S. Royal St. and the Register returned to 12 S. Royal St. The similarity in names between the Daily News and the

231 MEN October 3, 1865 1:1; October 5, 1865 1:1; Oct. 10, 1865 1:1.
Register and Advertiser’s late edition, the Mobile Evening News, grated on Forsyth’s sense of fairness and newspaper courtesy. He planned to file a lawsuit to keep Haile from using the News name, but in October Haile changed the name of his paper to the Mobile Daily Times.232

That did not stop the unpleasantness between Haile and Forsyth. Haile now tried to dig at the Register editor through his son, Charles Forsyth. During the Civil War, Charles served as a colonel in the Third Alabama Regiment, which was in many of the great battles in Virginia and was at Appomattox. While Charles battled for the Confederacy, a dashing young Cuban, P. G. DeVeyga, chased after Charles’ pretty wife.

When Charles returned to Mobile after the war, he learned of DeVeyga’s advances and attacked the Cuban with a knife during a theater performance. DeVeyga escaped with minor cuts.233

DeVeyga headed for New Orleans. In the fall 1865, New Orleans newspapers published an article that contained an insult against DeVeyga. The article appeared as though it had been authored by Charles Forsyth.

DeVeyga boarded a boat for Mobile. Upon landing at the Port City, DeVeyga headed for the Battle House hotel. There he spied Charles Forsyth conducting some business with another man. DeVeyga broke in between them and shouted “damn you” at young Forsyth. Charles remained calm and told DeVeyga “I’ll see you,

233 Hamilton, Five Flags, 312; MEN September 2, 1865 3:1.
sir, at another time and place.”

DeVeyga then slapped Charles, who drew a knife, grabbed DeVeyga by his coat collar, and started cutting the Cuban. DeVeyga fought back with his cane before police broke up the fight.234

A few days later, Haile traveled to New Orleans and wrote an article for the *Delta* about the incident, which questioned the honor of the Forsyth family. When Haile returned to Mobile, Charles Forsyth was waiting to confront the *Times*’ owner. Charles denounced Haile as “a liar, scoundrel and a coward” in the presence of others in attempt to provoke a duel.

Haile did not immediately respond, so Charles reported the incident in the *Register* and said Haile “Looked like a whipped hound.” Publication of the insult had the intended effect and Haile sent Charles a challenge, which he accepted.

As the challenged party, Charles chose double-barreled shotguns as weapons. When the city authorities heard of the intended duel, they arrested the two men and put them under bonds of $500 each to keep the peace.

Friends egged the two men on, however, and they met at Magnolia Park for the duel. At the park, they marked off 40 paces, raised their shotguns to the hip and fired. They both missed.

Apparently glad to be alive, Charles and Haile shook hands and headed back to Mobile where they “drowned their sorrows in the flowing bowl.” The duel ended the animosity between Haile and the Forsyths. A

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234 *MEN* September 2, 1865 3:1.
year later, Haile left the Times and Mobile for good.\textsuperscript{235}

Firmly back in control of the Register, Forsyth and Clark set about improving and enlarging the newspaper. The lack of almost everything, including money, following the Confederate defeat had the effect of increasing newspaper advertising for goods and services. By September 1865 ads reappeared on page one and the Register began publishing a two-page tabloid advertising supplement.

By April 1866 ads pushed news out of seven of the eight columns on page one and the local governments named the Register the “Official Journal of the City and County,” making it the recipient of all local government advertising required by law.\textsuperscript{236}

Forsyth and Clark also resumed publishing their late edition, the Mobile Evening News, and the eight-page Weekly Advertiser and Register. New type improved legibility and an increased page size opened space for the large number of ads.

Literary articles, news, and reports of church news from around the South filled a new, four-page, seven-column Sunday supplement. The daily continued to carry its regular editorials, local, national, and state news, local society articles, and reports from the mayor’s court. On Mondays, the Register carried poetry and serialized stories.\textsuperscript{237}

\textsuperscript{235} MEN October 10, 1865 1:5; New York Times November 2, 1865 1:3; MDA&R September 8, 1866 2:2.

\textsuperscript{236} MEN July 21, 1865; August 10, 1865 1:5; August 12, 1865 2:1; September 11, 1865.

\textsuperscript{237} MEN October 4, 1865 1:1; December 12, 1865; MA&R September 19, 1865; October 13, 1865; MDA&R December
Much as General Canby expected, Forsyth proved influential through his editorials in reconciling local citizens to defeat. He called on Southerners to accept the death of slavery and the changes that meant in the Southern economy.

He would watch and wait as Reconstruction policies rolled out. Through the Register, he called on readers to again become active citizens by taking the presidential oath of amnesty, qualifying to vote, and setting up a new state government. “We people of the South will soon spring again into active political life,” he wrote, “and we shall have our weight in shaping the destinies of our re-united States.”

During the late summer 1865, Forsyth took some time off from his labors at a pleasure resort down the bay. Rested, he boarded a bay boat in August back to the city. During the bay crossing, a tug carrying U.S. General Wager Swayne tried to overhaul the bay boat. Swayne hailed the boat to stop, but it only went faster as its skipper feared that Forsyth was about to be arrested.

Swayne chased the boat for several miles and at length overtook it. The general called Forsyth out and the other passengers looked on in anticipation of his arrest. Instead, Swayne offered Forsyth the appointment as mayor of Mobile, which he soon decided to accept.238

1865; December 24, 1865; January 16, 1866 2:1; April 1866; July 15, 1866.

When Mobile Mayor Robert H. Slough refused to admit evidence from blacks against whites in city court, Swayne forced Governor Lewis E. Parsons to remove him. Swayne threatened to declare martial law in the Port City and garrison it with black troops if the governor didn’t appoint a new mayor.

Sensitive to the political costs, Parsons listed two names, that of Forsyth and Frederick Bromberg, a leading Republican. The governor told Swayne to pick one. The general decided on Forsyth because he was a “hot Confederate,” a Democrat, feisty, and no one would dare criticize him. Forsyth served as mayor only until January 3, 1866, after which he served as an alderman.

As mayor, Forsyth allowed blacks to testify in city court, causing his fellow white Democrats to charge him with making blacks equal to whites. Forsyth, who believed in white rule moderated by paternalism, replied that he made the only realistic choice open to him. Accepting black testimony kept Mobile from being put under martial law.

Three months after being named mayor, Forsyth found himself thrust into an even more prominent political role. When the Legislature met on November 20, 1865, it considered him as a candidate for a seat in the U.S. Senate. For the first, and longer term ending

March 4, 1871, the Legislature selected Lewis E. Parsons without opposition.

In voting for the short term ending March 4, 1867, the lawmakers deadlocked for four ballots between George S. Houston of Limestone County and Forsyth. When the Houston forces offered to combine with Forsyth and give Forsyth the long term, ousting Parsons, Forsyth refused the deal out of regard for Parsons and the lawmakers elected Houston.239

It was just as well because congressional Republicans wouldn’t have allowed Forsyth to serve anyway. When Congress met in December 1865, the Republican majority refused to seat Southern representatives until their states guaranteed protection for Southern blacks and unionists. The majority also voted not to recognize the newly restored Southern state governments.

In the following months, Republicans in Congress united in support of a military Reconstruction program to guarantee political and civil rights for Southern blacks. Johnson’s actions encouraged his opponents to unite against him. He made heavy-handed efforts to block black suffrage and congressional programs that he saw as assuming powers that belonged to the

administrative branch.

General Ulysses S. Grant in February 1866 ordered commanders in the South to report newspapers that uttered disloyal words toward the federal government. His headquarters might then issue an order to suppress the papers.

Forsyth believed the order showed that Reconstruction would not be quickly achieved and that Radical Republicans would attempt to stifle opposition. That placed Southern newspapers in an unfair position, Forsyth argued. As the executive and legislative branches struggled for dominance over Reconstruction, he reasoned, taking sides with either could be considered a violation of Grant’s order. What’s more, Forsyth said, Radical papers were free to attack President Andrew Johnson without fear of suppression.240

In March, Forsyth lashed out in the Register at new congressional demands on the South: “... the South has made all the concession it means to make to restoration. First, because it has done enough, and second, because faith has not been kept with it in what has been done.”

Force of arms had settled the issues of secession and slavery, Forsyth admitted through the columns of the Register. However, he considered all the other questions before the nation to have restarted where they were

240 Chestnut, “John Forsyth,” 96-97; 103-104; MA&R April 11, 1866 2:2; Edward MacPherson, A Political Manual for 1866, Including a Classified Summary of the Important Executive, Legislative, and Politico-military Facts of the Period, from President Johnson’s Accession, April 15, 1865, to July 4, 1866. (Washington: Philp & Solomons, 1866), 123.
before the war. In 1866, he wrote that “we do not believe the result of the war is a vindication of ‘constitutional right.’ We cannot stultify ourselves by professing that force has convinced us we were wrong ….”

Forsyth’s attitude toward the freedmen and Reconstruction hardened. He steadfastly opposed blacks voting in what he considered a white man’s government. Forsyth didn’t understand how Northern attitudes toward former slaves and the South had been changed by the war.

General Carl Schurz, the German-American hero of the war and a journalist, responded to Forsyth in his newly launched Detroit Daily Post that “This is only a fair specimen of the prevailing spirit of ‘reconstructed’ Southern papers. ‘The South will concede nothing’—not a jot to Freedom, Justice, or Right. Is this accepting the result of the war? Is this a safe spirit to re-admit into political fellowship?”

Forsyth called Schurz “A fleck of scum thrown off and upwards from the seething post of German Red Radicalism in politics and atheism in faith, in an evil hour for the peace, morals and good order of the country, Carl Schurz executed the purpose of transferring his mischievous person to the United States.”

Many Northerners shared Schurz’s alarm that the victory won with blood on the battlefield could be lost with votes in the ballot box in the upcoming congressional elections. Since the end of the war, almost

242 Chestnut, “John Forsyth,” 96-97; 103-104; MA&R April 11, 1866 2:2.
all of the former Confederate states, including Alabama, had passed severe laws that limited the freedom of former slaves. Known as “black codes,” these laws mainly aimed at forcing the former slaves to labor for whites. The laws provided harsh punishments for vague crimes such as vagrancy.

The 1866 off-year congressional election was a referendum election for President Andrew Johnson. Either Johnson or congressional Republicans would control Reconstruction. The policies would be either moderate or harsh.\(^\text{243}\)

The *Register*, of course, favored Johnson’s moderate program and Forsyth was one of the state’s seven delegates attending the August 14, 1866, National Union Convention in Philadelphia called to support Johnson. Forsyth reported on the convention for the *Register* and believed conservatives rallying “under the old Democratic banner, will embrace all the moderate, peace-loving and constitutional men of the country, and their common duty will be to rescue the Government, the country, and its liberties … .”

The convention failed to bridge the gap between Johnson and the Republicans. After the convention, Forsyth went to New York to accompany Johnson on his “swing around the circle” speaking tour.

However, Forsyth became too ill to go on the tour, so he remained behind in New York and reported to the *Register* his observations on the campaign. His reports

didn’t reflect the North’s rising concern over the treatment of freedmen and he mistakenly predicted the nation would reject the Republicans on Election Day. The November election gave anti-Johnson Republicans a two-thirds majority in both the House and Senate, which could override any presidential veto of their programs.244

In March 1867, Congress took control of Reconstruction from President Johnson. To ensure Republican supremacy, the Republicans devised a Reconstruction plan to weaken Southern Democrats and reduce the power of the presidency, which had grown during the Civil War.

Congress enacted four Military Reconstruction acts, which divided the former Confederacy into districts controlled by the military and tossed out the postwar settlement that President Johnson had made. The Southern states were to create new constitutions that included equal suffrage for freedmen.

Alabama fell under the Third Military district led by General John Pope in Atlanta and his subordinate Brigadier General Wager Swayne in Montgomery.

Forsyth now stood on its head Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum on war. He prepared to conduct politics as a continuation of the Civil War by different means, and he forged the Register into a weapon of political warfare.

When Forsyth realized that Reconstruction policies depended on control of the freedmen, he courted blacks. Freedmen proved not so stupid as to believe that the white men of the Democrat Party, rather than the white men of the Republican Party, had their best interests at heart.

To stave off full Negro suffrage, Forsyth called for qualified suffrage along the same lines as that of Massachusetts. Then, he reasoned, out of 3 million blacks in the South, only a few thousand could become qualified voters.\footnote{MDA&R November 20, 1866 2: 1; May 8, 1867 2:1.}

To champion their cause, blacks in Mobile had founded the Loyal Newspaper Society in 1865 to purchase a press and outfit a newspaper, the \textit{Nationalist}. At a meeting of organizers in the summer 1865, a proposal to hire a white man as editor angered the more militant freedmen.

A \textit{New Orleans Tribune} reporter, who used the byline “Avery,” also was a black activist opposed to white leadership and tried to influence the direction of the \textit{Nationalist}. Avery most likely was Moses B. Avery or one of his sons. Moses Avery had grown up as a well-educated free black in Mobile.\footnote{Michael W. Fitzgerald, \textit{Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890}. (Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 50n3, 50, 56.}

The \textit{Tribune} reporter argued that hiring a white man would acknowledge the former rebels’ belief that blacks still needed whites to think for them. “There is none but colored men that can truly sympathize with their race!” he told the other organizers. “None but those who have
been subjected to the degrading influence of slavery that can truthfully lay our grievances before the world and claim its sympathy!”

Despite that ardent appeal, the organizers decided to hire John Silsby, a white teacher with the American Missionary Association, as its first editor. Following Silsby’s recommendation, the organizers set up the *Nationalist* as a joint-stock corporation. Several hundred people bought blocks of shares at $5 a share, which conferred voting rights. The shareholders decided they’d make major decisions at their meetings and elected a board of directors to oversee the work of the editor.

The organizers estimated the *Nationalist*’s production cost at $8,000 a year, too low to publish a weekly. Raising even that much proved to be a problem. Soon after issuing the first edition of the *Nationalist* in December 1865, Silsby called upon the missionary association for financial help for the fledgling newspaper, and to raise his meager salary. Silsby also asked the Freedmen’s Bureau to subsidize him. But more funds were not forthcoming from either the missionary association or the bureau.

The founding of the *Nationalist* illustrates two related issues that would bedevil Republicans during Reconstruction. One issue was the policy differences between the moderates and the militants in the party. The division prevented Republicans from solidifying a base that could be effective after federal force was withdrawn. The second issue was the need for income and the competition for limited funds between the factions to support each group’s party activists. The Democrats and the *Register* were able to drive wedges into these cracks and disrupt Reconstruction in Mobile.
The Nationalist survived the financial problems by depending on Northern advertisers, by receiving government patronage as the official U.S. printer, and by support from blacks. The newspaper’s office was symbolically and strategically located on the second floor of the Freedmen’s Savings Bank.

The Nationalist faced many obstacles in trying to get its views out among hostile white residents who weren’t used to blacks questioning white authority. Whites pressured businessmen with threats and social ostracism not to advertise in the paper, intimidated blacks not to subscribe, and threatened carriers not to sell their copies.

The Mobile Typographical Union refused to allow the Nationalist’s printers to join the local. One printer left town after he was threatened. Mobs attacked advertising and subscription agents in the interior of the state. The post office also often failed to deliver copies of the paper to subscribers.247

Silsby stuck it out with the newspaper only three months. When he left it had a respectable circulation of 1,200 and was one of three major Republican

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newspapers in the state.248

Silsby may have been forced out by the man named to take his place, Albert Griffin, who became the most prominent of the Democrats’ foes in Mobile. Griffin came to Mobile from a Chicago printshop in 1866 to be a printer on the Nationalist at a salary of $45 a week. He had lived in the South most of his life. Before the war, his father had published a newspaper in Macon, Georgia, and opposed slavery, for which a mob drove him out of town in 1855.249

In one of his first editorials, Griffin said that if the Republicans stay together and let it be known that “they intend to settle the reconstruction question according to their own ideas of justice and sound policy, without regard to-the demands of defeated traitors, all will yet be well ….”250

All was not well. A major outbreak of violence seemed inevitable. Blacks had begun asserting their

248 The other two were the Montgomery Daily State Sentinel and the Huntsville Advocate. A dozen other Radical county newspapers were scattered around the state. The Nationalist December 28, 1865; January 25, 1866 2:1; April 12, 1866 2:1; June 14, 1866 2:4; October 31, 1866 2:1; Mobile 28, 1867 2:1; September 12, 1867 2:1; November 1, 1868 2:1; Schweninger, “American Missionary Association,” 154-155; Malcolm C. McMillan, Constitutional Development in Alabama, 1798--1901: A Study in Politics, the Negro and Sectionalism (The University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 156.

249 The Nationalist April 5, 1866 2:1; MDR February 10, 1869 2:3; Dennett, South As It Is, 300-302; “Biographical sketch of Griffin family,” The Riley County Historical Museum, Manhattan, Kansas.”

250 The Nationalist April 5, 1866 2:1.
rights as more and more freedmen left plantations for Mobile, raising their share of the population to more than 4 out of every 10 residents.

Forsyth unleashed a steady stream of verbal abuse against black and white Republicans. He wanted white Democrats angry and ready to fight back. He portrayed freedmen as dupes of carpetbaggers and scalawags, simple-minded and easily misled.251

Democrat and Republican antagonists manipulated every incident between the races for political advantage. Partisans used racial conflicts to inflame passions and motivate followers to action, either at the ballot box or by direct deeds.

Such was the case in April 1867 when four black men broke into a home on Dog River. The men robbed the family, beat them, and raped the mother and her 12-year-old daughter. Freedmen’s Bureau agents and an army doctor investigated and confirmed the facts.

The Mobile Tribune claimed white radicals plotted the attack on the family. The Mobile Times blamed Republican “agitators, who plot mischief and murder.” The paper asked how long they; would “be protected from well-deserved punishment … ?” The Register promised “fearful vengeance.”252

A statewide convention of freedmen that opened in Mobile on May 1, 1867, adopted resolutions affiliating


itself with Republicans, praising the state’s Reconstruction military commanders, and calling for military protection to prevent election abuses. The delegates also asserted their “undeniable right” to hold office, sit on juries, ride public conveyances, sit at public tables, and in public places of amusement.253

Forsyth and his fellow Democrat editors stoked white Southern resentment against such freedmen activity and Republican Reconstruction plans. Democrat and Republican newspaper editors harangued each other and stirred up public emotions. Tensions rose. Whites and blacks carried guns.

Sometimes violence even seemed about to erupt between those on the same side. Henri St. Paul, the quick-tempered editor who took over the Times when E. O. Haile left Mobile in 1866, challenged John Forsyth to a duel over some supposed offense published in the Register.

The Belgium-born St. Paul spent his childhood in France and settled in New Orleans in the 1830s. He was a leader in the Louisiana secession movement.

Well known for his ability with a pistol and a sword, St. Paul also was a stickler for properly following the code duello. When Forsyth was 45 minutes late in sending a reply to the challenge, St. Paul put a notice in his Times that “Mr. John Forsyth is no longer entitled to

our notice.”

Into these churning waters stepped U.S. Representative William D. “Pig Iron” Kelley of Philadelphia. Kelley was one of the founders of the Republican Party and a champion of a high protective tariff for U.S. industries, especially iron and steel, from which he got his nickname “Pig Iron.” After Congress passed its Reconstruction program, Kelley and other Republicans headed South to enlist support for the Republican Party.

Kelley arrived in Mobile in mid-May 1867, just two weeks after the statewide convention of freedmen. The large meeting had broken up late at night with the departing convention delegates discharging firearms into the air.

Preceding Kelley’s visit, and that of Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts the day before, the Democrat newspapers carried announcements that Northern agitators were coming to the city. The Times told its readers that it hoped the people of Mobile would not treat Kelley as the people of Boston treated an Irish Catholic deputy marshal who attempted to return a slave to his master. In what seemed like a suggested course of action, the paper recounted that a mob beat the sheriff to death on the Boston common.

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254 MDA&R May 14, 1867 2:1; The Nationalist May 16, 1867 3:11; Brewer, Alabama, 431-432; Owen, Alabama Biography, 1609; Thomas Cooper Deleo, Belles, Beaux and Brains of the 60s (New York: G. W. Dillingham Co., 1909), 331.

A crowd of about 4,000, mostly freedmen, gathered May 14 at Government and Royal streets for the Republican rally at which Kelley was to speak. Kelley appeared with 100 other people, including prominent local citizens, Union soldiers, police, and reporters of the Cincinnati Commercial, Philadelphia Inquirer, and New York Herald.

As Kelley addressed the crowd at about 9 p.m., he cited the need for the North and South to unite and forget their differences that had caused the war. Then he recounted those differences saying that the South started the war to preserve slavery and that freedmen were being prevented from communicating with the North.

A gang of rowdies on the edge of the crowd at that point interrupted Kelley with some energetic heckling. “Take him down,” they shouted, “put him down” and “rotten egg him.”

Kelley shouted back that “I wish it understood that I have the 15th United States Infantry at my back; and if they are not enough to protect a citizen in the right of free speech, the United States Army can do it.” The crowd cheered in response and the police rushed to arrest the rowdies.

In the ensuing scuffle, some of the men drew guns and fired. The first shots caused a team of horses to run off with its carriage in tow. The crowd rushed to get out of the way. Other men then began drawing guns and firing into the air.256

Some of the 200 or so shots raked across the speaker’s platform. Kelley and his associates leaped from the stage. Escorted by a detachment of troops, Kelley’s party headed for the Battle House hotel. By the time U.S. soldiers and the police cleared the streets, one white man and one black man had been killed and about 20 people were wounded.\footnote{MDA&R May 15, 1867 2:1; May 16, 1867 2:2; Wiggins, “Kelley Riot,” 50-51; Andy Logan, The Man Who Robbed the Robber Barons (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1965), 94-95.}

The incident became known as the “Kelley Riot” and was widely reported because of the presence of the New York and Philadelphia journalists. After troops had restored order, the political finger-pointing began.

The Register said, “The whole affair is an occasion of much regret to every right-minded man.” But the paper called Kelley’s speech “inflammatory” and said it was “calculated to create distrust and hatred in the minds of colored men against their former masters.”\footnote{MDA&R May 15, 1867 2:1; May 19, 1867 2:1.}

The Nationalist countered that Kelley’s remarks were temperate and that “It was only those who had never been accustomed to tolerate free speech, and who sighed for the ‘good old days’ of despotism, who were inflamed at the exposure of the iniquity of their past course.” The Nationalist charged that Forsyth fired the first shot of the riot from a window of his house, which overlooked the speaker’s stand.

Forsyth and his wife, however, were attending violinist Carlo Patti’s concert at the Odd Fellows’ Hall at the time and the Nationalist was forced to admit its
mistake. For his part, Kelley laid the cause of the riot at the feet of one man, William D’Alton Mann.\(^{259}\)

Mann had been a Union cavalry colonel with Custer’s brigade during the Civil War. He came to Mobile in 1866 as an assessor of internal revenue, which allowed him to confiscate and sell Confederate property. But Mann soon proclaimed himself a Jeffersonian Democrat and associated himself with the Southern Democrats.

Kelley maintained in 1867 and for the rest of his life that Mann was “the chief promoter” of the riot against him. He accused Mann of placing the articles in the *Times* that excited public passions against him. He said that Mann had admitted as much in the presence of two other men in Kelley’s hotel room prior to his speech. Kelley called Mann a “cutthroat” who led the rioters on. “He meant to kill me ... It was a fearful scene, and that villain was solely responsible for it.”

Mann did not own the *Times* during May 1867, but he had advanced owner Henri St. Paul large sums to keep the paper going. Investigations of the riot by offices of the mayor, coroner, and federal court martial made no mention of Mann, who maintained that he was at the Patti concert also.\(^{260}\)

The morning after the riot, Colonel O. L. Shepherd assumed command of the city and declared martial law. General John Pope, commander of the Third Military District, declared the city offices vacant, suspended the police, and prohibited outside night gatherings. He

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\(^{259}\) *The Nationalist* May 23, 1867 2:2, 2:5.

prohibited the city’s newspapers from publishing any articles that might incite a riot and directed the provost guard to seize all large firearms from “improper persons.”

The *Nationalist* ignored the orders and commented that “The practice of carrying weapons is a very bad custom indeed, and should be abandoned as soon as possible by all classes. But it is especially important that the practice of firing into the air should be stopped. If a man is attacked, he has a perfect right to defend himself, but throwing away his ammunition only deprives him of the means of doing so.”

Seeing that as a call for blacks to shoot to kill, Shepherd suppressed that edition of the *Nationalist* and posted a guard over its office and printing rooms. Shepherd prohibited further publication of the newspaper until proof sheets were provided of each issue. Pope revoked Shepherd’s order a few days later and informed the Mobile commander that it was the duty of the military to secure, not restrict, freedom of speech.

In November, Griffin got a chance to settle Reconstruction questions according to his own ideas of justice as a delegate to the state convention drafting a new constitution. As chairman of the committee on voting qualifications, Griffin warned that “rebels, secessionists, and traitors” had to be disfranchised or Union men would be driven out of the state and Negroes deprived of the vote. John Carraway, a former

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261 *MDA&R* May 21, 1867 2:5; Fleming, *Civil War*, 481-482; 485.
262 *MDA&R* May 31, 1867 3:1; *The Nationalist* May 30, 1867 1:1; June 6, 1867 2:2.
Nationalist staffer and also a delegate, said that he would not disfranchise any whites “except the editors and publishers of rebel presses, who have done more harm than fifty thousand men.”

The new constitution the delegates framed did disfranchise some former Confederates while extending suffrage and citizenship to freedmen. Democrats quickly organized to oppose the proposed constitution and held a mass meeting in Montgomery before the convention adjourned.

John Forsyth led the opposition and played a major part in the campaign against adoption. Mass meetings followed at Mobile, Selma, Tuscaloosa, Huntsville, and most county seats to organize Conservative Clubs. Willis G. Clark, who was not only Forsyth’s partner on the Register but also the chairman of the Democrat Party’s Executive Committee for the First Congressional District, directed opposition to the proposed constitution in southern Alabama.

Ridiculing the local organization as the Wharf Rat Club, the Nationalist and its editors vigorously campaigned for passage of the constitution. Griffin appealed to working men by pointing out that the new document protected their wages from garnishment; that it provided state-funded schools; and that no poll tax could be levied except for support of schools. He told blacks that a vote for the constitution was “another nail

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in slavery’s coffin.”

Congress required that a least half of the registered voters participate in the election for the new constitution in order for it to be ratified and the state to be readmitted to the Union. The Democrats urged whites to stay away from the polls, threatened blacks not to vote, and successfully prevented the required number of persons from casting ballots.

Both sides charged fraud in the February 5, 1868, election and sent delegations to Washington to present their charges of irregularities to Congress. The Republican delegation consisted of Albert Griffin and two others. They carried affidavits and letters documenting charges of force, intimidation, closing of polls, and threats of discharge by employers against blacks.

They also charged that whites destroyed ballots and made “black lists” of those who voted. The Mobile Constitutional Club, in fact, published a pamphlet from the presses of the Register titled: “Roll of the Black Dupes and White Renegades who voted in Mobile city and county for the Menagerie Constitution for the State of Alabama.”

The Democrat delegation, composed of Forsyth and four others, charged that blacks were driven to the polls from county to county, many voting several times, and that women dressed as men voted. The Republican Congress, in no mood to listen to Democrats’ complaints, decided it would require only a majority of those voting to approve the constitution and Alabama

265 The Nationalist January 9, 1868 2:2.
rejoined the union.  

During the campaign against the constitution, General Pope issued an order that all government printing had to be placed in Republican newspapers. The government paid the Nationalist and the other Republican papers in the state $125 a week for four weeks to publish the document in their editions.

The Nationalist further got all the public advertising of the city and county governments, the Probate and Chancery courts, the sheriff, clerks of courts, and federal courts. An exception was the U.S. District judge, who caused all the ads he controlled to be placed in the Register.

Although Pope later modified his order so that Democrat papers could receive ads, the Legislature continued the requirement that deprived the Register of an estimated $10,000 in revenue a year, the paper claimed. The Register labeled the ad requirement as an attempt to “break the last shield interposed between Rump tyranny and its prostrate victims, the white race of the South.”

The Register called on the business community to make up in commercial ads what the Republican government took away in official ads. But the newspaper’s revenues continued to fall. This occurred in part because the city’s economy declined as the nation’s growing rail network shifted the cotton trade from Gulf to Atlantic coast ports. The railroads also diverted from Mobile other products that used to flow on the rivers to

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266 McMillan, Constitutional Development, 169-170; Fleming, Civil War, 541; The Nationalist March 19, 1868 2:3; Ezell, South Since 1865, 83.
In contrast to the South’s regional journalism, big city Northern newspapers quickly adopted modern methods and equipment after the war, and promoted a national outlook. First the war and then Reconstruction delayed the South’s ability to take part in the changes sweeping the rest of the country. The Register and Mobile looked provincial and behind the times, at least to big city Northerners, whose homeland hadn’t been wrecked by warring armies.

John Forsyth had been a Democrat Party activist editor since the 1830s. Before and after the Civil War, he often met with party leaders in the North to craft party strategy. During Reconstruction, he wielded the Register as a political weapon in a political war without quarter to his political opponents.

The Register served as the Democrats’ party headquarters for Mobile, and often for the state. Politicians frequented the newspaper office for editorial support and counsel. For one election, the newspaper put the 45 men in its mechanical department on the street to drum up Democrat voter turnout, causing the Register to miss the next day’s edition.

Forsyth and the Register were typical among white Southern editors and newspapers resisting Reconstruction. Forsyth was probably the ablest among them as a defender of white supremacy and the fiercest opponent of carpetbaggers, scalawags, black politicians,

\[267\] MDA&R November 27, 1867 2:1; MDR February 4, 1868 2:1; December 1, 1868 2:2; April 1, 1869 2:1; The Nationalist April 16, 1868 2:5; McMillan, Constitutional Development, 156.
Republicans, and Radicals.  

Forsyth expended his energy trying to rouse former Confederate loyalists to political action and striving to return the nation to a semblance of the antebellum political order. Neither Forsyth nor the Register, however, commanded the national attention they once did. Forsyth sought political influence without the audience he once held.

Forsyth and other newspaper editors of his time had woven together a national communication network of partisan newspapers and subscribers. Now that network was unraveling. Even before the war, the threads of the network had weakened. By the 1850s, planters already had begun to move to new lands in Texas, Arkansas, and other Western states. As they did, Mobile’s economic fortunes began to decline in relation to Northern cities and other newer Southern cities. During Reconstruction, the new rail lines only accelerated changes already under way, shifting patterns of buying, selling, settlement, and communications.

The Register’s audience of subscribers, which the newspaper depended on more than advertising, was changing. The network of readers, advertisers, businessmen, merchants, planters, factors, riverboat captains, politicians, and citizens that the Register had built up before the war was in tatters.

The war, of course, disrupted some of the relationship patterns. But new towns had their own

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newspapers with their own subscribers with different information needs. Even if most of them were political newspapers, their politics and ambitions were different than those of Mobile.

Information needs even in Mobile had changed. Forsyth’s political and racial views pushed some potential readers outside of the Register’s audience. Because blacks flooded into Mobile in large numbers after 1865, the Republican Party had a significant base in the city. This gave Republicans a power in local politics until nearly 1880 and kept politics competitive afterward.

However, this didn’t result in an advantage to the Republican Nationalist against the Register and its Democrat competitors. The Nationalist had its own unique problems.

Most newspapers, whether owned by blacks or whites, Republicans or Democrats, North or South, were run by a single owner or a few partners. The Nationalist had set itself up as a joint-stock company with many small shareholders. The shareholders frequently disagreed among themselves about the conduct of the paper. The discord reflected the disagreements that also roiled local Republicans as a party.

The black Southern shareholders also cast a wary eye toward the white Yankee staff. The shareholders resented the higher-than-average salaries they had to pay to attract staff. The company’s Board of Directors, who oversaw the editor, was also rived with factions. Almost no one associated with the Nationalist knew anything about running a paper and some of them until
recently had been slaves.\textsuperscript{269}

Unlike the old Democrat and Whig newspaper battles, the \textit{Register} and the \textit{Nationalist} could not work toward a common vision for Mobile’s future. Political battles distracted them from the city’s declining commercial fortunes, as well as their own.\textsuperscript{270}

The \textit{Register} was the first to suffer the result of ignoring the bottom line. Heavily involved in political campaigns against the constitution and unable to turn around the Register’s own financial problems, Forsyth and Clark sold the paper in January 1868 for $40,000 to William D’Alton Mann.


\textsuperscript{270} Doyle, \textit{New Men}, 237, 37, 69.
CHAPTER 8
Struggle for Survival

William D’Alton Mann knew how to manipulate the levers of power to get what he wanted. If money could be made in publishing the Mobile Daily Advertiser and Register, then he could do it.

He had a knack for making both money and friends. He was, after all, a well-liked and successful former Union colonel in a former Confederate stronghold. Buying the Register gave Mann the respectability he needed in Southern eyes to make additional friends and even more money.

With the purchase of the Register, Mann owned two of the city’s three morning newspapers, his other being the Mobile Times. Mann had taken a liking to Times owner Henri St. Paul and his son-in-law, John L. Rapier. From time to time, Mann lent money to St. Paul when the Times was pressed for funds. St. Paul and Rapier eventually owed so much to Mann that they turned the paper over to him and offered to stay on as his employees.

The colonel also owned both evening newspapers,
the *Mobile Evening News*, the late edition of the *Register*, and the *Mobile Evening Telegram*, the late edition of the *Times*. He decided that the city couldn’t support so many papers, each with an annual outlay of about $100,000, so he combined the two morning papers as the *Mobile Daily Register* and the two evening papers as the *Mobile Evening News*. Mann considered the city’s third daily, the *Mobile Tribune*, of too little importance to be worth buying.

John Forsyth retained a minority business interest in the newspapers and served as editor in chief. Mann reportedly paid Forsyth $4,000 to $5,000 a year to stay on as editor. Willis G. Clark retired and turned to his many other interests including a paper mill at Beaver Meadow in northern Mobile County. St. Paul retired from the newspaper to devote himself to his law practice and to politics. Rapier became the business manager of the newspaper.\(^{271}\)

Mann, just 27 years old when he came to Mobile in 1866, already had an event-filled life. In 1859, he inherited 100 acres of farmland along with a rundown building in Ohio that he tried to operate as a hotel. He abandoned the effort in 1861, leaving a trail of debts.

At the start of the Civil War, Mann wangled a commission in the First Michigan Cavalry and took part in the Second Battle of Bull Run. Two years later, Mann, now a colonel in command of the Seventh Michigan Cavalry, played an important part in the Battle of Gettysburg under General George A. Custer.

During the war, Mann received a patent on a device for arranging a soldier’s battle gear and in December 1863 incorporated Mann’s Patent Accouterment Co. The government ordered thousands of the tackles, but when the war ended, so did the orders.

After the war, Mann went into the oil business. He bought a single acre near Titusville, Pennsylvania, where the world’s first oil well gushed forth in 1860, and another 200 acres near his abandoned farmland in Ohio.

Mann gave his business as the official-sounding name of U.S.(for United Service) Petroleum and Mining Co. He persuaded former Union officers to invest in his enterprise, whose Titusville connection gave the impression that it was certain to find oil.

Mann diverted most of the funds from his former fellows in arms to his own pocket. Four stockholders swore out a warrant for his arrest in June 1865 and his trial in New York lasted for several months before the judge dismissed the case because the court lacked jurisdiction.

In 1866, Mann came to Mobile with an appointment as an assessor of internal revenue and the authority to

confiscate and sell certain Confederate property. Mann amassed a considerable fortune from his federal office far beyond his $3,500 yearly salary.

Former Confederates assisted him in diverting to his own use money due the U.S. Treasury because his loose enforcement of regulations also allowed merchants to keep thousands of dollars that would have otherwise gone to Washington.273

Mobilians courted the scraggly bearded Mann for his political and business influence and welcomed him into their social circles. On his second Christmas as publisher of the Register, Mann threw an extravagant dinner at the Battle House hotel and invited editors from around the South and local businessmen, attorneys, and others.

Mann greeted each guest and plied them with eggnog and vast amounts of food including turkeys, pressed buffalo tongue, venison, red snapper, mutton, oysters, and duck complete with sage and onion stuffing.274

Mann’s guests toasted their host as “one of Alabama’s greatest capitalists.” Another guest offered that “May the pride of the South in its adopted son be excelled only by his own distinguished merit.”

Standing to respond to his guests, Mann’s booming voice filled the room. He told his dinner guests that he was grateful for the kindness they’d shown him as they worked together for Mobile’s success. He said he was

273 MDR August 8, 1869 2:1; Logan, Man Who Robbed, 11-12, 90, 103.
274 Logan, Man Who Robbed, 11-12, 90, 103; MDR December 28, 1869 3:3.
deeply touched by “so cordial expression at this moment.”275

Not all Southerners, however, welcomed Mann into Mobile society. J. R. “Jack” Eggleston, one of the editors of the Tribune, exhibited particular bitterness toward Northerners, even those who supported the Democrat Party.

“We regard the influence that is exerted here by strangers holding Federal offices as the most dangerous that the people have now to encounter,” the Tribune said in reference to Mann. The newspaper accused Mann of being part of cotton frauds and whiskey rings and called Forsyth a man who has “a cracked voice.”

The Register put down the Tribune’s complaints as those of jealous newspaper rival and said that it did not care of the Tribune editor “whether his voice or his brain is cracked.” At one point, Eggleston steamed out on the pages of the Tribune to do battle with Mann like the C.S.S. Virginia going out to meet the U.S.S. Monitor at Hampton Roads. Eggleston, who had served as a lieutenant on the Virginia, attempted to goad Mann into challenging him to a duel. But the colonel refused to be drawn into gun play.276

Northern and Southern Republicans working in Mobile also did not welcome Mann. As their spokesman, the Nationalist charged that part of the money Mann used to buy the Register came from Washington Democrats who supported Andrew Johnson for re-election.

275 MDR December 28, 1869 3:3.
276 MDR May 15, 1868 2: 1; June 12, 2: 1; The Nationalist June 18, 1868 2 :4.
Even if true, the charge was largely meaningless. Political parties at the time typically supported friendly editors, often directing taxpayers’ funds for advertising and printing when the party was in power. Griffin himself went to Washington to personally lobby Congress for federal advertising.277

The Register in turn accused the Nationalist of stealing all the public advertising, the money for which “comes out of suitors, widows, and orphans, might just as well be thrown into the river, for none but negroes take the paper, few of whom can read, and none of whom have any sort of interest in the matter advertised. The whole sum is stolen by the Legislature to keep up a ‘nigger’ paper, and Griffin being the receiver of stolen goods, is a bad as the thief.”

The Nationalist fired back: “How much (if any) has the proprietor of that paper, Mr. Mann, the U.S. Ass., stolen or defrauded the government of? Was he, or was he not incarcerated in the Toombs at New York for a fraudulent issue of stock in an oil company? If the receiver is as bad as the thief, how is it with the individual who takes Mr. Mann’s money?”278

The Register attempted to discredit Albert Griffin and sow discord among the Nationalist’s black supporters. The Register falsely accused Griffin and George F. Harrington, an Ohioan who came to Mobile in command of a black Union regiment, of booking

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passages for blacks on schooners to Cuba. On arriving at the island, they were supposedly sold into slavery. Griffin curtly responded that “Mr. Forsyth is a liar.”

Discord, however, seemed a constant state of affairs at the Nationalist. In 1867, Griffin had quietly told his supporters to buy up as many shares in the enterprise as they could. He saw the many small shareholders as interfering with his control of the paper. Then Griffin led the effort to cut the board of 15 black directors to five, with Griffin serving as president and the paper’s foreman, James Shaw, serving as secretary.

In 1869, black Republicans opposed to Griffin made their move to get rid of the editor. Lawrence S. Berry, a Nationalist director and a city alderman, tried in January to take the city’s printing contract away from the Nationalist. Berry’s fellow aldermen blocked the move, but they did insist that the paper publish three days a week. Griffin had long said he intended to publish the Nationalist daily.

Within a couple of months Griffin was in Washington lobbying for a federal post in Hawaii. Berry and two other Nationalist directors used Griffin’s absence to discharge him from the newspaper. They accused him of circulating a report that the committee in charge of the newspaper planned to throw it into the hands of the Democrat Party. By that ruse, the stockholders said, Griffin had sought to buy up the newspaper’s stock at his own price. The stockholders

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279 The Nationalist September 27, 1868 2:1; 2:2.
also accused Griffin of neglecting his duties on the paper for his own private business, mostly seeking public office.  

Griffin’s fortunes improved over the next couple of months and by July, with the help of some of his followers, he had regained control of the Nationalist’s office. Griffin’s supporters beat up Berry and threatened to kill him. Griffin had to ask them in an editorial to leave the alderman alone.

Meanwhile, the Register proposed to aid the redemption of the South from Republicans by supporting a Democrat of Northern birth as the candidate for Congress from the First District of Alabama: None other than Colonel William D’Alton Mann.

The nominating convention dutifully selected the Register’s proprietor who, in his acceptance speech, professed his lifelong support of the Democrat Party:

“I was born and bred under teachings of pure Jeffersonian Democracy … And my course in the war was in accord with what I believed a conscientious duty. I fought simply, as I then believed, to maintain the Union, the integrity of the Government of my forefathers, and not as it

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has turned out, to subjugate the Southern people and destroy the State Governments.”

His speech was “frequently interrupted by loud and hearty applause, and at its close the cheering was quite vociferous,” the Register reported.\textsuperscript{283}

To oppose Mann, the Republicans picked Alfred Eliab Buck, a transplant from Maine. During the war, Buck served as a lieutenant colonel of U.S. Colored troops, first the 91\textsuperscript{st} and then the 51\textsuperscript{st} Infantry. For his courage in the attack on Mobile’s defenses at Fort Blakeley in April 1865, Buck was brevetted to a full colonel. In Mobile, he held state, county, and municipal offices.

It was probably no coincidence that four days before Election Day U.S. Treasury agents arrived in Mobile to look into charges against Mann. The agents were investigating whether Mann pocketed $1.5 million from the federal government in his job as assessor of internal revenue, which he had resigned the day after his nomination.

The Register called the presence of the treasury agents “a dirty electioneering trick” that appeared to be confirmed by the agents’ failure to take action against Mann. The failure to seek an indictment may have stemmed from the fact that one of the offices Buck held included that of deputy assessor of internal revenue, which would have implicated him in any criminal action.\textsuperscript{284}

\textsuperscript{283} MDR June 23, 1869 2:2.
\textsuperscript{284} MDR August 1, 1869 2:1; August 8, 1869 2:1; Fleming, \textit{Civil War and Reconstruction}, 750; Logan, \textit{Man Who Robbed}, 97-100.
The first election returns from the city showed Mann with a two-to-one margin over Buck. A large crowd gathered to celebrate at the headquarters of the Democrat Central Committee at Mammoth Hall on Dauphin Street across from Bienville Square. In a sweltering August heat, the crowd packed densely into the hall to listen to Mann’s acceptance speech.

The crowd roared its approval of Mann’s speech. Then, led by a band, the crowd paraded through the streets. Stopping in front of the Register office, the crowd gave three cheers for Mann and the Register and continued to celebrate until late into the night.285

The crowd celebrated prematurely. Later returns showed Buck carrying the rural areas as well as Camden and Selma, all heavily populated with freedmen. Officials declared Buck the winner by 4,000 votes. The Buck partisans then prepared their own celebration for August 5, which happened to be the fifth anniversary of the Battle of Mobile Bay.

Rumors spread that the freedmen intended to burn Mann in effigy and that whites planned to respond to the insult with a riot. Republican Mayor Caleb Price stationed a detachment of the U.S. 2nd Infantry at the guard house not far from the rally spot.

A largely Republican crowd gathered near lighted tar barrels at Government and Royal streets, the site of the Kelley riot, around 8 p.m. on August 5. Some white Democrat ruffians also joined the throng of about 1,500 mostly freedmen. Republicans charged that 50 roughs

285 MDR August 4, 1869 3:1; August 6, 1869 2:1, 3:2; Aug. 12, 1869 3:3; The New York Times August 4, 1869 1:3; Logan, Man Who Robbed, 99-103.
arrived on a special train arranged by Democrats from the nearby town of Whistler.

Many on both sides were armed. Knots of armed white men gathered on Government Street intersections west of the rally site and on side streets.

The Mobile Nationalist said there was “no disposition on the part of the Republicans white or black, to raise a disturbance.” The Nationalist’s recently restored editor Albert Griffin called the meeting to order and spoke praising Buck. Someone in the crowd shouted, “You’re a liar!”

Yet the crowd remained peaceful until around 10 p.m. While H. Ray Meyers spoke, a white man in the crowd shouted, “Hurrah for Mann.” The black Republicans started “hurrahing for Buck.” According to the Nationalist, Dave Reid, white foreman of Merchant’s Fire Company No. 4, started shooting. Others in the crowd either returned fire or began shooting with Reid and the “balls fell like hail.”

The Register said the white Republicans fled while the Nationalist said it was the Democrats who ran. The Nationalist said some of the Republicans encouraged Griffin to move to a safer spot, but he refused to leave the speaker’s stand and instead addressed the crowd, telling them to go home quietly. Police urged other black leaders to hurry along the rally goers to their homes.

But the firing continued with whites moving north on Royal Street and blacks moving west on Government Street. Crowds of men moved back and forth on the streets, firing at each other. Three freedmen were killed and the wounded included four police officers as well as five freedmen and three white men.

After much gunfire, the blacks headed for their
neighborhoods, northwest of downtown. Squads of white men patrolled downtown streets, while the police watched the angry freedmen gathered on streets around their residential area.

About 50 white men marched up St. Louis Street to the home of Republican Frederick Bromberg. There they gave three cheers for William D’Alton Mann and fired a volley of shots at the house. No one was hurt.

Another group went to the house of William Lenoir, the pressman for the Nationalist. The white rioters called the newspaperman “Griffin’s nigger” and threatened to kill him. Cooler heads finally prevailed and the white men left.

Some of the mob searched for Griffin, who hid in a livery stable, protected by black bodyguards. Over the next few days, the Register blamed Griffin for the riot and threatened that he and others responsible would pay. The paper said, “if these [carpetbagger] wretches are ambitious of dangling to lamp-posts, all they have got to do is turn loose their infuriated wild beasts once more.”

Griffin managed safe passage out of the city and left Mobile for good, headed for Manhattan, Kansas. “In getting rid of him the community is rid of the most mischievous, persevering, and malignant, because the ablest member of his tribe,” the Register said. “White supremacy has been asserted and vindicated.”

In Manhattan, Griffin started another newspaper called the Nationalist, founded other Kansas newspapers, and became prominent in Republican politics. After a successful career, he died at his home in Topeka in 1908.

Bankrupt, the Mobile Nationalist died soon after Griffin’s departure from the Port City. Moderate white Republicans bought the press and types and issued the
Mobile Republican. Another faction started the Mobile Herald in 1871. Black and white Republicans fielded other newspapers in Mobile over the years to support their views, but none ever again had quite the same power and influence as the Nationalist.

Mann never acknowledged Buck’s victory and in his later years described himself as a member of the Forty-first Congress.286

Turning from politics, Mann pursued his many business interests. He had already sunk $100,000 in a cotton seed oil refinery called the Mobile Oil Co. The cotton seed oil industry had assumed tremendous commercial importance after the war and was attracting the attention of Northern investors. Mann had also made investments in the iron ore mines of Elyton, later to be called Birmingham.

Mann won the contract to provide the crossties for the construction of the New Orleans, Mobile, and Chattanooga Railroad on the section of the road between Mobile and New Orleans. The railroad had proposed to

286 MDR August 14, 1869 2: 1; MDR August 4, 1869 3:1; August 6, 1869 2:1, 3:2; Aug. 12, 1869 3:3; The New York Times August 4, 1869 1:3; Logan, Man Who Robbed, 99-103; New Orleans Times-Picayune August 8, 1869 10:5, August 10, 1869 2:3; Demopolis Southern Republican August 11, 1869 3:2; August 11, 1869 3:3; August 11, 1869 2:1; Selma Morning Times August 7, 1869 1:1; Selma Times-Argus August 11, 1869 3:3; August 11, 1869 2:1; Alabama State Journal August 14, 1869 2:3; “The Mobile Riot,” National Anti-Slavery Standard August 28, 1869 1:5; Michael W. Fitzgerald, Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890. (Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 142-144, 147; “Death of Albert Griffin,” Manhattan Mercury October 7, 1908, 9.
build its repair shops in Mobile, if the city provided a grant of several hundred thousand dollars.

The *Register* supported the railroad’s request, which came before the city in May 1869. The *Nationalist* strongly opposed the grant, though it generally supported government subsidies. The city at first turned down the request, but after several weeks of political wrangling approved it over the objection of several Democrat aldermen.

The railroad began construction of its shops. But some of the city’s leading businessmen challenged the grant in court and succeeded in getting the payments stopped. The opponents were led by Moses Waring, who was a director of the Mobile and Alabama Grand Trunk Railroad.

The Grand Trunk was seeking the city’s approval of $1.5 million bonds for its planned line to the coalfields of Elyton, which would have been in Mann’s interest. The *Register* also had supported the Grand Trunk’s subsidy, but obviously opposed Waring’s court challenge of New Orleans, Mobile, and Chattanooga.

Construction of the New Orleans, Mobile, and Chattanooga Railroad continued. Laying of the first rail of the road called for a celebration. A throng gathered on Water Street on November 8, 1869, to watch Mann drive the first spike.

Mann took the opportunity to praise Mobile as a port and natural outlet for the cotton trade. But, he said, there also were other sources of wealth open to the port: iron ore and coal from the mines of Alabama and timber from its pinelands.

Reflecting the New South business ethic that would become associated with Atlanta a decade later, Mann
said, “We had but to turn our attention from the old ruts of business from the ‘staple,’ to those new sources of profitable industry, and Mobile could grow great, though not a bale of cotton should come here. Let us then, disenthraling our minds, our business energies, from the shackles of Old King Cotton, turn a share of our attention to these new fields and see how soon Mobile will double her population.”

Mann spoke under stormy skies, but as he prepared to drive the first spike the sun “burst forth in all its brilliancy, which was construed by all present as a most favorable omen the dawn of a brighter day to Mobile.”

The Register might be forgiven its literary license, which seemed based on Mann’s boundless business enthusiasm. A year after he drove the spike for the New Orleans, Mobile, and Chattanooga, Mann organized the Mobile and Northwestern Railroad. He proposed to build the M & N to Jackson, Mississippi, and on to the Yazoo Valley cotton fields and then to Helena, Arkansas, to tap the grain fields of Kansas and Nebraska.

To construct the 400 miles of the Mobile and Northwestern at an estimated cost of $4 million, Mann received generous charter privileges from Mississippi and Alabama. The two states granted him more than

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2 million acres of land and exemptions from taxation.

Mann’s railroad building plans met with excited approval from Mobile’s businessmen who worried that the railroads stretching out from Savannah encroached on their markets in Alabama and Mississippi. Interior towns that could process and market cotton and other farm products grew along new rail lines and eliminated the need for such services from Mobile.

A railroad that would push to the west and link up with the great Pacific railroads seemed destined to bring great fortune to Mobile as the eastern terminal on the Gulf. Such a railroad also would help Mobile overcome the advantage the Mississippi River gave New Orleans. Under the prompting of the Register, the city of Mobile issued $1 million in bonds to aid construction of the Northwestern.\(^{288}\)

Like other railroads built on government subsidies and not in response to market demands, construction of Mann’s lines proved costly and inefficient. Mann built the New Orleans, Mobile, and Chattanooga without regard for permanence. Contractors used untreated timber for the many pilings and bridges needed to cross marshes and bayous. Marine organisms attacked the untreated wood, causing it to deteriorate.

With a few miles of the Mobile and Northwestern built out of the city and 16 miles completed in Mississippi, money ran out. Creditors foreclosed and the $300,000 it added to the city debt was a factor in causing the city of Mobile to default on its own debts, losing its

\(^{288}\) MDR June 2, 1871 2:1; June 16, 1871 3:2; H.B. Owen, Story of Alabama, 167-168; Logan, Man Who Robbed, 106--107; Somers, Southern States, 182-183.
charter and ceasing to be a city in 1879. Meanwhile, the Mobile Oil Co. burned to the ground in 1872 and, typical of Mann’s quick-money schemes, was uninsured.

To raise his share of funds for his ventures, Mann had mortgaged the Register and subcontracted work on the New Orleans, Mobile, and Chattanooga to Isaac Donovan, who supplied the crossties. In March 1871, Mann was forced to turn the newspaper over to Donovan in order to meet his obligations to the contractor. Mann sold whatever assets he had left and departed Mobile in 1872.  

In 1874, journalist Henry Grady published an editorial in his Atlanta Daily Herald under the headline, “The New South.” Grady argued that the South needed to develop its industries and railroads to rebuild its economy and society. The editorial won him a wide audience. It also earned Grady the managing editor job and a quarter ownership of the Atlanta Constitution, which he used to promote industrial development. After Grady’s untimely death in 1889, Daniel Augustus Tompkins at the Charlotte Observer took up the New South crusade.

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Had Mann succeeded in his business ventures, he would have been remembered as an early champion of the New South creed, preceding both Grady and Tompkins. But Mann didn’t succeed. Although he had an economic vision, Mann’s bad judgment and the inability to see how others would react to his self-promotion led to financial ruin. Mann was never one to let reality get in the way of his schemes.

Many of the Port City’s citizens fondly remembered Mann and he frequently visited Mobile, especially during Mardi Gras. In 1890, Mann was back in Mobile trying to raise $25,000 to build the Mobile, Jackson and Kansas City Railroad. The owner of the Register, John L. Rapier, served on his committee selected to sell the stock for the line, which eventually reached Chicago through mergers with other lines.

Although he was no newspaperman, Donovan tried to make the best of his new property. His life, in fact, was one of making the best of what fate handed him. Born in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1814, Donovan came to Mobile in 1839 and started a boarding house. When that business failed, he moved his family to a log cabin in the rural community of Kushla. He kept a clerking job in Mobile during the week and walked every Saturday night the 17 miles or so to Kushla. He returned to the city on Sunday nights.

In 1852, he contracted to keep the telegraph line from Mobile to Montgomery in working order and in 1854 was elected county tax assessor. At the same time, he conducted a retail wood business, but he was too generous in granting credit to his customers and had to abandon the business. Then he won a contract to supply crossties to the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and delivered
more than a million of them.

In January 1872, Donovan reorganized the Register by incorporating it as the Register Printing Association. Donovan served as president, John Forsyth as editor-in-chief, John L. Rapier as secretary and treasurer, and F. E. Stokes as business superintendent.

The owners prepared a new home for the Register in the four-story building known as the Roper House, which had been built as a hotel at the southwest corner of St. Michael and Royal streets. It marked the first time any newspaper in Mobile had owned its own building.290

Down Royal Street from the new Register building was Nickerson’s saloon, a frequent watering hole for newspapermen. On the night of March 15, 1872, Charles Forsyth, commercial editor of the Register and son of John Forsyth, walked into the saloon. Bar patrons recalled a down-hearted look on his face.

After a few minutes of leaning on the bar, he walked behind the counter looking for the derringer he knew the bartender kept there. But because of Charles’ worried look, the bartender told Charles he had lent the gun to someone.

Charles then told one of the six men in the bar that he would pay a thousand dollars for someone to kill him. Walking over to one of the men he knew, Captain

290 MDR February 1, 1872 2:1; July 2, 1872 3:2; December 22, 1872 3:1; DR October 11, 1887 4:2; “Interesting Transcriptions and Cataloging Notes from the Miscellaneous Books of Probate Court Records for 1818-1884,” (Works Progress Administration, 1939) MMA Box 54, Envelope 4, Misc. Book H, 367.
William P. Fowler, Charles pointed to his derringer and said “Billy, lend me that.” Fowler said, “What am I going to do then?” Forsyth replied, “Do you think I’ll not give it back?”

Charles took the gun, raised it behind his right ear underneath his wide-brimmed felt hat, and pulled the trigger. He died later that night. Charles’ death may have been caused by his concern over his wife’s fidelity or worry over the financial condition of the Register or both.\textsuperscript{291}

Politics distracted John Forsyth for a time from his family’s tragedy and the Register’s financial problems. The 1872 presidential campaign made for some seriously strange bedfellows. The Democrats joined with the Liberal Republicans, who opposed the re-election of President Ulysses S. Grant, to back Horace Greeley.

In May 1872, Forsyth journeyed to New York for a meeting of the Democrat National Committee, which was still debating support for Greeley at the time. While there, he had a private meeting with Greeley and thought the Democrats could do better. Forsyth opposed the party going with Greeley and said so in the Register. “The Register is unalterably against Greeley … and if we follow him, we follow him to defeat and disgrace.”

Meeting back in New York in June with other Democrat Party leaders to decide whether to back Greeley, Forsyth oddly voiced support for Greeley. He had to swallow mighty hard to back Greeley, a former abolitionist with radical social views. Yet Greeley had called for amnesty for former Confederate officials and

\textsuperscript{291} MDR March 14, 1872 2:1; March 15, 1872 1:6; March 16, 1872 1:6; July 16, 1872 2:1.
an end to Reconstruction. Forsyth believed that only a
united Democrat Party could redeem the South and end
Reconstruction.

Forsyth’s reversal on Greeley opened the editor to
widespread ridicule from his newspaper brethren. For
the first time since 1848, except for during the Civil War,
Forsyth skipped the Democrat National Convention. He
could do no more than voice support for the party in the
presidential election, which the Democrats lost badly to
Grant.292

John Forsyth never really seemed to recover his
health after his son’s death and the editor’s doctor
ordered him to take time off. In late spring 1873, Forsyth
turned over editorial control of the newspaper to
Thomas Cooper DeLeon and left for a tour of Europe.
He sent reports of his travels to the Register. Back in the
United States in late October, Forsyth was still too
unwell to return to his duties.

Mobile suffered a summer of racial unrest in 1874 as
the Democrats and Republicans prepared for
congressional and state elections in November and city
elections in December. Politicians harangued crowds
from the steps of the U.S. Customs House at the
southwest corner of Royal and St. Francis streets.

Republican factions fought each other for the
potential of federal spoils. A group opposed to the civil
rights bill before Congress used fists, knives, and other
weapons to take over one election of party delegates.
The militants supporting the bill eventually won out and

292 Lonnie A. Burnett, The Pen Makes a Good Sword: John Forsyth
of the Mobile Register. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama
the factions regrouped for the fall campaign.

Democrats sensed they could win and redeem the state from Republicans and Reconstruction at the November election. Forsyth drew a white line and pulled out all the racial stops in the campaign.

Forsyth damned scalawags as traitors to the South. The Register suggested that the best way to deal with lawless blacks in Mobile was to grab them by the throat and “not waste words upon them.” Forsyth also called for economic pressure to put blacks in their place. He asked Mobile’s employers to give white mechanics and laborers preference for supporting the Democrat Party, the white man’s party.

Political office beckoned Forsyth again in 1874. At the Montgomery convention of the state Democrat Party in late July, Forsyth led in two rounds of delegate voting for a congressional seat. A split in the Mobile delegation led to the body selecting General William H. Forney of Calhoun County.

In August, the Mobile County Democrats nominated Forsyth for the state House. But Forsyth took to his bed in the final weeks of the campaign, too physically weak to go on the stump. He also took another break from his duties at the Register.

On the Saturday before the November 3 election, Democrats put on a huge show of strength with a demonstration near Forsyth’s house. Starting at the corner of Royal and Government streets, the site of the Kelley riot, the Democrats paraded down Government Street as roman candles and sky rockets lit the night. The parading men carried a sign that read “For the Register, the White man’s paper” and another, “For Col. John Forsyth.” That Saturday also happened to be Forsyth’s
On Election Day, Mobile Democrats marshalled vigilante forces to guard polls and intimidate black and white Republicans. One melee resulted in two blacks being killed and several others shot. The tactics worked and Democrats took control of the Legislature. In December they also swept the city offices. Reconstruction was at an end in Mobile and Alabama.

Easily elected to the Alabama House, Forsyth journeyed to Montgomery to attend the chamber’s session when it convened in late 1874. Offered the post of speaker, Forsyth turned it down and his health continued to deteriorate so badly that his doctors in 1875 ordered him to stop all work. Forsyth again turned over his editorial chair to DeLeon.

In July, his physicians ordered Forsyth to take an extended vacation. Forsyth boarded a Mobile and Ohio Railroad train for the Virginia mountains and other health resorts and stayed away from the Port City for nearly a year. When Forsyth returned seemingly improved, DeLeon noted that he “had lost all his fire and much of his zest for his loved game—politics.”

293 MDR March 14, 1872 2:1; March 15, 1872 1:6; March 16, 1872 1:6; July 16, 1872 2:1.

Taking over the editorial duties while Forsyth was away was Thomas Cooper DeLeon. DeLeon came to Mobile in August 1868 at the invitation of William D. Mann to be managing editor of his newspapers. DeLeon brought with him an offer from a New York backer to buy the Register. The offer was accepted, but the deal was never closed. DeLeon, meanwhile, stayed on with the Register. For more on DeLeon see MR May 7, 1905 8:1; Centennial Remembrance, n.p.; T. Owen, History of Alabama, 3:477-478; DeLeon, Four Years in Rebel Capitals, 5-8;
Worry over the financial problems of the Register may have contributed to Forsyth’s poor health. Many Southern newspapers faced problems similar to those of the Mobile newspaper. The Civil War and Reconstruction had brought an end to many Southern dailies. Many of those that managed to survive the war or begin afterward were brought to an end by the Panic of 1873. The six-year long economic depression nearly brought the Register to an end of its run as well.

The Register faced financial disaster because Isaac Donovan had continued contracting for railroad work. In supplying crossties for the Mobile and Alabama Grand Trunk Railroad, Donovan took the bonds of the company for payment. The bonds declined in value. At one time, Donovan could have sold them for 82 cents on the dollar, but friends persuaded him to hold on to the bonds until they returned to par. The Panic of 1873 made the bonds worthless and Donovan broke.\(^{294}\)

In March, Forsyth and John L. Rapier formed a partnership to rescue the Register. But in the midst of these troubles and just after Forsyth had agreed to the

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\(^{294}\) *MDR* March 27, 1874 2:2.
new partnership plan, James Gordon Bennett, Jr., threw Forsyth what looked like a lifeline. Bennett offered Forsyth $7,500 a year to become editor in chief of the New York Herald. Forsyth prepared to move to New York.

Forsyth’s friends talked him out of the move and promised to invest $6,000 in the Register to rescue the newspaper. Confident in their finances, Forsyth and Rapier moved ahead with their partnership. Forsyth took charge of the editorial department while Rapier handled the business department. The two partners mortgaged the Register’s equipment and building for $10,000 to raise much-needed cash.²⁹⁵

But red ink continued to sink the newspaper’s fortunes. In April 1876, Rapier asked the Mobile County Chancery Court to dissolve the partnership with Forsyth and sell the newspaper. Rapier charged that Forsyth had failed to raise the needed $6,000 as agreed under the partnership and that Rapier had to keep the firm operating with $2,800 out of his own pocket.

Forsyth argued that the Register’s annual gross revenues of $80,000 were enough to pay its debts without Rapier having to resort to personal funds. Besides, Forsyth maintained, Rapier was the business manager and controlled the newspaper’s books and budget.

Chancery Court Register Joseph Hodgson, a former

²⁹⁵ MDR July 1, 1876 2:1; May 27, 1877 2:3; DR October 15, 1886 2:2; October 11, 1887 4:2; June 25, 1889 2:3; Mobile County Probate Court, Miscellaneous Record Book 1871 I-J, 255-259; Mobile County Chancery Court, Rapier v. Forsyth, April 22, 1876.
Montgomery editor, dissolved the partnership and appointed himself receiver at the request of both Forsyth and Rapier. But in June, Forsyth and Rapier reached an agreement on a sinking fund that forestalled the sale of the newspaper and Hodgson dismissed the case.²⁹⁶

Forsyth had often complained through the columns of the newspaper that its readers and advertisers didn’t properly support the paper. He said “the Southern people do not sustain their newspapers as it is to their plain interest to do. Hence the number of newspapers whose short-lived necrology we are called upon to record. The fatality has been peculiar to this city. In truth, Mobile has not the business to afford full support to an institution so costly as a daily newspaper.”

At many points over his years at the Register, Forsyth had tried to impress upon his readers how expensive it was to produce the newspaper. By this time, the Register was paying out about $2,250 a week for wages, paper, telegraph tolls, rent, gas lighting, and many other items. And this didn’t include costs for replacing machinery, making interest payments, and paying other costs.²⁹⁷

Ads from the city alone, he said, don’t support the

²⁹⁶ MDR July 1, 1876 2:1; May 27, 1877 2:3; DR October 15, 1886 2:2; October 11, 1887 4:2: June 25, 1889 2:3; Mobile County Probate Court, Miscellaneous Record Book 1874 I--J, 255-259; Mobile County Chancery Court, Rapier v. Forsyth, April 22, 1876.
newspaper and revenues gathered from outside the city exceed those gathered within. That statement would seem to indicate the importance to the newspaper of national advertising contacts. The advertising of national goods with brand names and trademarks was just beginning.298

Despite the financial woes, politics continued to beckon Forsyth. The New York Herald urged Alabamians in 1876 to elect Forsyth as its U.S. senator. Forsyth, however, sought further rest and took a trip to the Western Alleghenies. His health worsened and he came home where he died May 2, 1877, surrounded by his family. Among the large crowd of mourners gathered for the service at Christ Church and burial at Magnolia Cemetery on May 4 were members of the Alabama Press Association, which happened to be meeting in Mobile at the time.299

Newspapers around the country paid tribute to Forsyth. The New York Sun crowned him as the successor to Thomas Ritchie, founder of the Richmond Enquirer. Ritchie also had served as the national spokesman for the Democrat Party until his retirement from the Washington Union in 1851.

The Sun said, “The editorial prominence and influence in Southern politics of John Forsyth ... were

298 MDR July 1, 1876 2:1; May 27, 1877 2:3; DR October 15, 1886 2:2; October 11, 1887 4:2: June 25, 1889 2:3; Mobile County Probate Court, Miscellaneous Record Book 1874 I--J, 255-259; Mobile County Chancery Court, Rapier v. Forsyth, April 22, 1876.

299 MDR November 15, 1871 3:3; May 2, 1876; Centennial Remembrance, n.p.
owing to his remarkable talents, intellectual strength, and long experience. For a whole generation his name has been familiar among the journalists of the country; he has been regarded as a leader by a large portion of the Southern press, and he has often exercised a measure of control over popular opinion and in matters of policy that no other Southern editor has equaled since the days of Father Ritchie. There will be deep regret, far and wide, that John Forsyth is dead.”

In 1874, Henry Grady, then with the Atlanta Herald, regarded Forsyth as the best editorial writer in the South. A few years later, Joel Chandler Harris in the Atlanta Sunday Gazette, a weekly review begun by Grady, referred to Forsyth as the editor in the South who made a “permanent impression” on journalism.

Robert Hiram Henry, editor and owner of the Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Mississippi, called Forsyth one of the greatest editors he had ever known. “He was regarded as the truly great editor of the South, for Forsyth’s time, Henry Watterson was just coming on the stage ... and Henry Grady was unknown ....” Henry remarked, “Under Forsyth’s control the old Register was a great paper, one of the most influential in the land ....” Watterson, who often disagreed with Forsyth’s political stands, nevertheless once said of the Mobile editor that “If there is a brave and upright man in the South, a journalist who cannot be bought or bullied, it is the editor of the Mobile Register.”

300 MDR May 8, 1877 2:2.
Forsyth was a political journalist who waged policy and election battles from his mid-20s until he became too ill in his mid-60s to carry on. Forsyth had a mixed record of success in backing candidates, as you might expect. But toting up wins and losses of individuals who Forsyth backed for office misses the point.

Forsyth operated in an age of highly competitive politics from a corner of the state where his party didn’t have a natural following for its causes. As a commercial city, Mobile’s politics usually favored Whig policies such as national and state banks and internal improvements.

Many of the Port City’s businessmen were former Yankees whose economic interests and Northern connections encouraged a national, rather than regional, outlook. They also were inclined to be Whigs and active in the city’s social and civic affairs. This meant that Whigs tended to dominate the city government and the area’s state legislative seats. Democrats dominated most of the rest of the Alabama and Whigs never controlled state government.

The Democrats as well as the Whigs went through frequent splits and reorganization. Forsyth sought to hold the party together. As a partisan editor and party leader, Forsyth influenced the making of party policy, explained it, recruited and encouraged candidates, and motivated the party faithful to vote or take other action. Partisan journalism had little to do with factual reporting. Partisan editors spread information in support of a cause.

Forsyth proved better at holding the Democrat
Party together than his competitors. Northern Whig leaders’ opposition to the expansion of slavery raised questions among Southern Whigs about the national party’s commitment to protect slaveholding. Forsyth used the slavery issue to the Democrats’ advantage. The Whig Party began to break apart in the 1850s. Some Alabama Whigs began to drift into the short-lived Know-Nothing Party but more joined with Democrats to protect slavery.

That left Forsyth to contend with William Lowndes Yancey’s Southern Rights faction of the Democrat Party. Yancey and his followers pulled Forsyth and the rest of the party into secession, not unwillingly, but perhaps sooner and more swiftly than they would have chosen otherwise.

Political parties had been vital for Southerners to defend their interests within the former Union, but there was little need for them in the Confederacy. They also didn’t have much time to develop, although there were pro-Davis and anti-Davis political factions. The Confederate president served a six-year term, so there was never a national election after Jefferson Davis became president in a nation that lasted only four years. Forsyth devoted himself and the Register to covering the Civil War and shoring up the Confederate will to fight.

With the end of the war, Forsyth sought to reset the political party calendar back to 1860. In place of slavery, the major battles were now fought over control of the freedmen and assuring their subordination to Southern whites.

Most criticism of Forsyth focuses on the issue of race: his support of slavery, his backing of the Confederacy, his resistance to Reconstruction, and his
promotion of white supremacy. Many of Forsyth’s contemporaries, north and south of Mason-Dixon Line, held similar views. He perhaps was the most articulate and prolific spokesman among them.

Though he fervently believed in white supremacy, Forsyth wielded racism as another political weapon seeking an advantage over the opposition.

Forsyth’s death marked the end of an era, not just for the Register but also for American journalism. Most of the great leaders of the era of personal journalism were dead. Henry J. Raymond, one of the founders of the New York Times, died in 1869. James Gordon Bennett, Sr., founder of the New York Herald, died in the summer 1872, followed five months later by the death of Horace Greeley, founder of the New York Tribune.

John Forsyth had been a writer and editor for 42 years by the time of his death at age 65. Even an ordinary journalist with a career that long would rack up his share of supporters and critics. But Forsyth was no ordinary journalist. Certainly, no other contemporary Southern journalist achieved the same stature as Forsyth.
The death of John Forsyth must have added to the gloomy atmosphere that enveloped Mobile and the *Register* during the late 1870s. A nationwide, six-year-long business depression had begun in 1873 and businesses in the Port City suffered along with the rest of the nation.

The sinking fund Forsyth and John L. Rapier set up to rescue the newspaper from being sold for its debts sucked up all the earnings of the *Register*. The paper fell behind in competition and news service.

As if the business depression hadn’t dealt the newspaper a serious enough blow, a fire in January 1876 destroyed most of the block in which the *Register* was located. The *Register* and the Bank of Mobile were the only two buildings left standing in the block bounded by Royal, St. Michael, St. Joseph, and St. Francis streets. The south wall of the *Register* cracked and buckled in the fire,
leaving the newspaper with about $32,500 in damages.\footnote{MDR January 15, 1876 1:2; DR June 25, 1889 2:3.}

The city government faced similar financial hardships. Tax collections declined as business contracted. Taxes didn’t generate enough revenue to run even the regular city departments. As a result the city could not meet its obligations on railroad bonds and other debts. A Northern visitor reported that Mobile looked “dilapidated and hopeless.”

In 1879, the Legislature dissolved the city charter and established a Port Government. A plan to pay off the city’s debt was drawn up by attorney Hannis Taylor, a close friend of Rapier’s who occasionally contributed articles on politics and law to the \textit{Register}.\footnote{Hamilton, \textit{Mobile of the Five Flags}, 365; Alma E. Berkstresser, “Mobile, Alabama, in the 1880s,” thesis, University of Alabama, 1951; Tennant S. McWilliams, \textit{Hannis Taylor: The New Southerner as an American} (University of Alabama Press, 1978) 9; Brownell, \textit{City in Southern History}, 104.}

Mobile declined in rank among both American and Southern cities as its economy and population failed to keep up with the growth of other cities. Mobile dropped from being the fourth largest Southern city behind New Orleans, Charleston, and Richmond in 1860 to being the fifth largest city in 1870 and eighth largest in 1880.\footnote{Brownell, \textit{City in Southern History}, 93.}

The antebellum prominence of the \textit{Register} had depended on its city’s economic prominence in the country. As Mobile declined in economic status, the \textit{Register} declined in journalistic influence, although a new generation of newspapermen long remembered its former days of glory. John Lawrence Rapier steered the
Register through this changed state of affairs as best he could.

He’d faced adversity before. Rapier’s father, Thomas G. Rapier, had come to Mobile from Bardstown, Kentucky, at the request of Bishop Michael Portier to take charge of Spring Hill College, where John was born June 15, 1842. The Rapiers moved to New Orleans in 1847 after the Jesuits took charge of the college. Rapier’s father became a public school principal and for five years served as superintendent of schools in one of the Crescent City’s districts. The senior Rapier died in 1854 and 12-year-old John and his older brother, Edward, had to go to work to support their mother and younger brothers and sisters.

When the Civil War began, Rapier volunteered for Major Henri St. Paul’s company of the Chasseurs-a-Pied. Rapier and St. Paul became close friends as their unit saw action at Seven Pines, Second Manassas, Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg.

Rapier wearied of being a foot soldier and transferred to the newly formed Confederate marines. Ordered to Mobile, he was taken prisoner at the surrender of Fort Gaines on August 8, 1864. Rapier engineered a daring escape from his New Orleans prison and made his way back to Mobile. In the Port City, he joined the crew of the gunboat Morgan, commanded by his cousin, Captain Joseph Fry.

After the surrender of Confederate force in Alabama, the federals paroled Rapier and he returned to Mobile. He married Regina St. Paul, the daughter of his former commander. Fatally ill with tuberculosis,
however, she died six months later.\textsuperscript{305}

When St. Paul joined the \textit{Mobile Times}, Rapier came to work for his father-in-law to handle the newspaper’s business accounts. After William D. Mann merged the \textit{Times} with the \textit{Register}, Rapier remained with the newspaper as a clerk.

When Isaac Donovon formed a joint stock company in 1872, Rapier became a stockholder and the secretary and treasurer of the Register Printing Association Inc. Following Donovon’s departure, Rapier and Forsyth became partners in running the paper until Forsyth’s death.

As an urban newspaper, the \textit{Register} had become a large manufacturing operation employing many specialized, highly skilled workers. The kind of personal involvement that had characterized the proprietorships of Thaddeus Sanford and Forsyth before the Civil War just wasn’t possible any longer.

The four-story \textit{Register} building at the southwest corner of St. Michael and Royal streets stood as a metaphor for the changes that had taken place in the newspaper business. The building had formerly been a hotel, which workmen gutted and then braced with iron beams and pillars.

On the first floor, the accountants occupied the front rooms and the printing presses the rear. On the second floor were Rapier’s office and that of the editorial staff.

Compositors, who sat at type cases 20 hours a day in shifts, occupied the entire third floor, one great room facing Royal Street. In a third-floor wing was the news and telegraph room. On the fourth floor were some smaller rooms for the Agricultural Department.\textsuperscript{306}

Rapier’s business skill got the newspaper through the hard times and by the 1880s Mobile and the \textit{Register} began to recover with the rest of the nation from the depression. The coming of technological advances to the city seemed to signal a brighter future.

The nighttime at least became brighter in February 1884 as newly installed incandescent light bulbs at the \textit{Register} building glowed a silvery white for the first time. The paper boasted that “No other building south of the Ohio river is illuminated with these lights … .”

The \textit{Register} quickly converted to the new electric lights because breezes from open windows often blew out the old gas lights. The windows had to be kept open to clear out the considerable heat and smoke from the more than 80 gas burners illuminating the building’s rooms.

So the \textit{Register} ran more than a mile of wire through the building and suspended a light bulb above each work area. The paper installed its own eight-horse power engine to run a dynamo, and at 6 o’clock each night turned on the engine to light the building.\textsuperscript{307}

Advancing technology also brought changes in printing. In 1870, the \textit{Register} had replaced a single-cylinder Hoe steam press with a faster double-cylinder press of the same make. This press still made

\textsuperscript{306} \textit{MDR} December 22, 1872 3:1.
\textsuperscript{307} \textit{DR} March 2, 1884 1:5.
impressions on paper directly from the type forms.

In December 1888, the Register installed a $10,000, Goss web-perfecting press that made use of stereotyping for printing. The 17-ton press was the pride of the newspaper and it boasted that the press was the best available. The Goss press equaled about six ordinary newspaper presses and could print 20,000 four-page newspapers an hour, 330 a minute.

Such rapid printing was possible because of the stereotype, a curved solid metal reproduction of a page of type and pictures. After the hand-composed page forms, frames that held the metal type, came from the composing room, workmen made an impression of the page in a matrix, or cardboard-like substance. The matrix was essentially a mold. The Register’s laborers put the matrix in a curved form.

Two men handling a big ladle, which pivoted on a long handle, dipped molten lead from a huge furnace and poured it against the matrix. This produced a curved metal page, the stereotype. Men rushed the still-hot stereotype to the rotary press.

Through the press ran newsprint from rolls weighing a half-ton. The path of the newsprint through the press was called a web. As the press ran, it printed both sides of the paper, then folded and cut the sheet into newspapers.

The whole process took only about 15 minutes. This changed the appearance of the newspaper as it no longer needed rules between columns to hold the type together. Multiple-column headlines were now possible. This was assembly-line, mass production applied to
Although the *Register* now had a press that could print much faster than previous presses, the hand composition of type was still a bottleneck. Hand composition had changed little from the days the first newspapers set up shop in Mobile.

Setting type required several shifts of compositors to sit at the type cases 20 hours out of every 24, “and here the ceaseless click of the busy type, as it drops in the ‘stick,’ the rumble of the ‘proof-press,’ the monotone of the proofreader, and the sharp calls and orders—through the speaking tubes from the other rooms—makes a ceaseless scene of industry and active business life.”

Typesetting became mechanized when the *Register* installed six Linotypes early in July 1893. The average hand compositor set about 700 lines of type on a 10-hour shift. An operator at the Linotype could produce about 2,500 lines of type on an eight-hour shift.

The Linotype, which cost about $3,000 to buy or could be rented for about $500 a year, operated by a keyboard similar to a typewriter. The machine cast lines of type on a metal slug that it automatically justified and then assembled the individual lines of type on a galley.

The increased speed of composition afforded by the Linotypes meant compositors put in fewer hours to set up the newspaper. Increased output also meant that the

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308 MDR February 6, 1870 2:1; March 27, 1870 2:1; DR Dec. 25, 1888 2:2; DR Dec. 25, 1888 2:2.

paper needed fewer men setting type, and some were laid off. One group of printers thrown out of work joined together to publish a rival newspaper, the Daily Herald.\footnote{DR May 23,1902 6:1.}

That made three dailies in the city: the Register, the Herald, and the Mobile Daily News. In 1897, the weekly Item converted to an afternoon daily, giving the city four daily newspapers. The Register was the only one of the four to issue in the mornings. The Register had its own evening edition, the Evening News, until the summer 1869 when its name was changed to the Evening Register.

The publication of the Herald, the Daily News and the Item were a part of the remarkable increase in U.S. newspapers that began in the 1870s and continued unabated through the 1880s. During the 1870s, besides the Register there were at various times in the city no less than four other dailies, three white-owned weeklies, and a black-owned weekly. There also were five specialized weeklies, such as religious and commercial newspapers.

During the next 20 years there were five dailies, seven white-owned weeklies, five black-owned weeklies, and six specialized newspapers. Most of the papers were short-lived, but competed with the Register for ad revenue and subscribers.

That competition and the need to modernize equipment in part explain the Register’s continuing financial problems. To provide needed cash, Rapier induced leading businessmen and financiers to form a new stock company in 1889, the Register Co., to replace the John L. Rapier & Co.

Saddled with a considerable floating debt, heavy
interest payments, and a lack of sufficient working capital, the *Register* nearly went under in the Panic of 1893. The newspaper had a total value in its building and equipment of $45,235 plus a subscription list worth between $8,000 and $12,000. The owners nearly sold the newspaper to pay its debts, but saved it through bankruptcy reorganization.\(^{311}\)

The growth of afternoon newspapers, a national phenomenon more marked in cities the size of Mobile than in larger cities, resulted from the increased demand for late telegraphic news and changing social patterns. People going shopping or home-bound after work wanted the ads, reading matter, and entertainment material offered by afternoon publications. Theater patrons found it convenient to buy afternoon papers. Electric lighting made it easier to read newspapers’ fine print at night.

Women liked afternoon newspapers because they had more leisure time in the afternoons to read and shop. Department stores aimed their ads at these women readers. Daily newspapers, particularly afternoon publications, and department stores sort of matured together through the late 1800s. From their beginnings in the late 1800s, Mobile’s department stores advertised heavily in the city’s daily newspapers, mainly the afternoon journals.\(^{312}\)

\(^{311}\) *DR* August 17, 1886 2:2; October 15, 1886 4:3; October 16, 1886 4:5; October 17, 1886 3:3; March 20, 1889 2:1; July 19, 1893 2:1; January 31, 1895 1:2; Mobile County Chancery Court records, number 5399, August 16, Oct. 3, 1893, Inventory of *Mobile Register*.

\(^{312}\) Mott, *American Journalism*, 446-447.
Rapier aggressively sought advertising for the newspapers. Local department stores such as C. J. Gayfer’s & Co., Hammel’s, and Spira and Pincus began to advertise national goods with brand names and trademarks. These ads demanded more display space on the newspaper page than the ads that were once sold by the square only and set in small type.

By 1881, large display ads with drawings, trademarks, and headlines that crossed several columns were the rule. Many of the inventions of the late 19th century could be found in the ads: bicycles, telephones, and typewriters. The department stores advertised so much that they are credited with the reason afternoon newspapers gained larger and larger audiences.

Rapier retained a Northern advertising manager in New York as an agent in getting national advertising. He also used special editions to generate advertising revenue. Since 1840, the Register had issued an annual trade edition on the first week in September. Rapier expanded the review of the city’s business with articles on many of the city’s firms, and it often contained other features, photographs, and illustrations. In the 1870s the issue ran about 12 pages. In the 1880s it ran 16 to 18 pages, and in 1907 the trade edition ran a mammoth 52 pages.

Other advertising promotions included Mardi Gras special editions, which ran to eight pages and contained drawings of parade floats printed in color. The Register, furthermore, printed special editions promoting the Louisville and Nashville Railroad and other lines. Through these special advertising sections, the Register promoted Mobile as a New South city ready to do
business, welcoming investment and tourism.\textsuperscript{313}

The rollout of electric streetcars in Mobile in 1893 expanded the car lines to previously isolated areas, stimulating a real estate and housing construction boom after the turn of the century. That in turn stimulated real estate advertising and by 1906 the \textit{Register} devoted a full page to real estate ads.\textsuperscript{314}

Another great stimulus to ads made its appearance on the \textit{Register}'s pages in 1909. The Southern Hardware & Supply Co. began advertising for sale the new line of cars from the Hudson Motor Car Co., which had just started production. Car sales and automotive products became important sources of ad revenue.\textsuperscript{315}

By 1910 the \textit{Register} carried about 336,000 agate lines of advertising each month bringing in gross revenues of at least $34,000 a month. Advertising volume had increased so much that the newspaper established a copywriting service at no cost to merchants in order to give them professional advice on ad makeup.\textsuperscript{316}

Circulation figures became increasingly important to advertisers who wanted to reach large markets.

\textsuperscript{313} Michael Schudson, \textit{Discovering The News: A Social History of American Newspapers} (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1978), 93; \textit{MDR} September 1, 1875; December 15, 1877 4:2; \textit{DR} October 15, 1881; September 1, 1882; March 11, 1882; December 9, 1882 4:3; January 16, 1883 2:5; May 1, 1884 2:1; November 23, 1884; February 1, 1885 5:1; September 1, 1889; November 9, 1891; May 2, 1893 4:4; September 1, 1897 1:1; May 5, 1898 8:3; \textit{MR} September 2, 1907.

\textsuperscript{314} \textit{MR} May 15, 1906 9.

\textsuperscript{315} \textit{MR} August 1, 1909 14:3.

\textsuperscript{316} \textit{MR} January 1, 1910 3:1; March 1, 1910 7:1; November 12, 1909 4:2.
Although eight New York dailies had circulations of more than 100,000, many major American cities had no paper with more than 20,000. No New Orleans paper passed the 20,000 mark until after 1892. The afternoon Atlanta Journal, the largest daily in Georgia, had a circulation of 12,610 in 1890. The Constitution followed with 10,984.

Circulation for U.S. dailies averaged about 4,500 in 1870 and 5,200 by 1890. The Register had a daily circulation of about 5,000 in 1882, well below that of its major Southern contemporaries, but within the national average. By 1910 the Register’s circulation had slowly climbed to about 10,000.317

Weekly editions of daily newspapers were important to spreading the influence of the publications. In the early 1870s, the Register had boasted that it “now confessedly stands at the head of the list of Southern journals” and that the circulation of the Weekly Register surpassed either of the two leading New Orleans papers.

But before 1886, the Atlanta Constitution’s weekly edition reached 140,000, the largest in the United States. Henry Watterson’s Louisville Courier-Journal weekly edition likewise grew in circulation and influence far beyond that of the Weekly Register as Louisville grew in population and economic power and Mobile fell behind

other Southern cities.\textsuperscript{318}

Rapier looked down on the promotional games many newspapers used to get the participants to subscribe to the newspaper. These included guessing games, prize offerings, and voting contests for the most popular young woman, fireman, or labor union member.

Publishers presented the increased circulation from such promotions to advertisers as a reason to place ads in the newspaper. But, the \textit{Register} pointed out, “the wise merchants will readily understand that a paper published for no other purpose than the cutting of a ‘coupon’ out of it, cannot be said to be ‘circulated,’ in the proper meaning of the word.”\textsuperscript{319}

Improving its wire news service had been a goal of the \textit{Register} since Reconstruction when the newspaper considered the Associated Press to be in the hands of Radicals and “is a humbug and a nuisance.” The \textit{Register} first looked to the Western Associated Press as an alternative to the AP and then tried to form its own news-gathering service in association with two other Mobile papers. But the service foundered because of its expense. Capital costs were at least $12,000. The service also failed because disputes developed among the members.\textsuperscript{320}

Dealing with problems of technical innovations, advertising, circulation, labor, capital costs, and news services required the skills of trained managers, a trend occurring in business generally. In connection with other

\textsuperscript{318} MDR March 27, 1870 2:1; April 1870 2:1; June 18, 1871 2:1.
\textsuperscript{319} MR March 1, 1903 6:1.
\textsuperscript{320} MEN October 19, 1865 1:1; November 17, 1865 1:3; MDA&R September 2, 1866 2:1.
regional newspapers sensitive to such managerial challenges, the *Register* in April 1880 sent Paul J. Robert to Atlanta where Southern newspaper representatives formed the Southern Press Association.

The choice of Atlanta further symbolized the shifting of influence away from Old South coastal cities and toward the interior cities of the New South. Nevertheless, members of the association selected Robert as one of the directors of the new group.321

The association got an agreement from the AP for an increase in the number of words sent over the telegraph wires and reflected the *Register’s* heightened regard for news and other content. The agreement with the AP called for an increase of 1,000 words daily, giving the *Register* a total of 4,800 words a day from the wire. That jumped to 10,000 in 1889. In 1894, the *Register* pushed back its deadline from 3 a.m. to 4 a.m. to allow for the increased news flow.

Four years later, the *Register* had two telegraphic wires carrying 24,000 words of copy from the AP. Shortly after the turn of the century, the *Register* added the Hearst News Service, which provided numerous feature articles and illustrations.322

The variety of columns, articles, and features added


322 *DR* December 9, 1894 4:1; April 8, 1898 4:1; *MR* January 1, 1905 4:2; November 15, 1909 4:1.
after Reconstruction demonstrated the newspaper’s concern for finding and keeping new readers, especially women, “Our Kettledrum,” a local column in the late 1870s, gave tips to homemakers. “Uncle Charley’s Perplexities” contained word riddles and games. A veterinary column in the late 1880s provided information on livestock. “The Social World” column in the late 1890s covered social news and gossip. As photography became a popular hobby, “Lens and Camera” gave readers tips on how to take the best photos.

Syndicated features included women’s fashions with large photos, music scores, juvenile stories and projects, and comics. Comics became a regular feature of the *Register* in the early 1900s. With the addition of the Hearst news service, four pages of color comics became a much-read feature.

Because even newsmakers rested on weekends, editors had to fill their Monday pages with something other than hard news. Expanded literacy, available gas and electric lighting to read by, and increased leisure time created a demand for more material to read for enjoyment.

Reading novels had become a pleasurable pastime in the late 1800s. Serialized novels had become such a standard form in American literature that the best authors often created their works to be published in installments in newspapers and magazines. Only later did publishers compile the serial as a single book. About 1886 the *Register* began using a full page of the paper to present serialized novels with illustrations.

The newspaper even used letters to the editor in a new way to meet readers’ demands. Ever since the
newspaper began publication, letters had been carried anonymously, as was the custom nationwide. In 1885, the Register collected letters under the heading “The Editor’s Letter Box” and carried the writer’s name.323

Horse races, hunting, and other sports of the Old South had long had some space in the Register, but sports news increased greatly after 1880. One sports story on the Gulf Coast in 1889 drew nationwide attention.

John L. Sullivan spent the summer of that year in New Orleans preparing to defend his boxing title against Jack Kilrain. Boxing matches were illegal so the site for the fight was a closely guarded secret. Fans had to purchase train tickets to an unknown location.

The Register editorially condemned the match everyone knew was about to take place as well as prize fighting in general. But when more than 3,000 visitors showed up in the lumbermill town of Richburg, Mississippi, which had a normal population of about 300, to watch the fight, the Register had arranged to get telegraphic reports.324

A crowd began to gather in front of the Register’s accounting room and the telegraph office at about 8 a.m.

323 MDR January 16, 1876 2:1; DR April 1, 1883 5:3; February 15, 1885 4:3 November 1, 1885 8:4; August 16, 1886 2:1; April 15, 1888 2:5; April 2, 1893 4:1; November 15, 1896 5:5; April 24,1898 6:3; October 19, 1902 1:2; May 15, 1903 5:1; July 15, 1903 5:1; August 23, 1903 10; November 1, 1903; MR June 1, 1906 7; September 27, 1906 8:1; May 25, 1907 8; May 26, 1907 6:3; May 31, 1908 2:5.
July 8 to hear news of the fight. Knots of men gathered along Royal Street for the four blocks from the Register office at St. Michael Street to Government Street. The crowd grew in size as the hours passed and the men awaited news of the boxing match.

Men flooded the Register staff with questions. Every time a newspaper runner “poked his nose out of the office door, he was besieged by a throng of expectant, waiters, and plied with all manner of interrogatives … .” One gambler tried to bribe a reporter with $25 for a tip on the fight’s outcome.

At 2 p.m. the crowd surged from the sidewalk into the Register’s counting room and almost took control of it. The staff called police to clear the men out. As the afternoon wore on, the crowd again became rowdy as rumors spread that the Register was withholding news of the match for use in an extra. The crowd again surged into the counting room at 4:30 p.m. demanding to know the outcome of the fight.

The editors, awaiting reports, held the evening edition four hours past deadline and finally went to press at 6 p.m. The newsboys took to the streets shouting “Yer’s y’extra, all about the prize fight,” which had gone on for 75 bloody rounds before Sullivan won by a knockout. The sales that night were the largest ever up to that time for the Register, the paper claimed.325

Before the end of the 1880s, the Register separated sports news on special pages. But baseball games, especially those played by Mobile and other Southern League teams, were such big news that they were regularly featured on the front page. The bicycle craze of

325 DR July 9, 1889 1:1.
the ‘90s brought news of bicycle races including night races and one race between a horse and a bicyclist.

A Mobile football team formed in 1893 and college teams received regular coverage in the paper. Soon after the turn of the century, the paper reported golf matches and basketball games.\textsuperscript{326}

The widened scope of news that now filled six to eight pages of the daily papers, and up to 16 pages in Sunday editions, required many men with many talents. In the 1880s, newsgathering also began to attract the talents of many women.

The participation of women was perhaps stimulated by the formation in 1885 of the Women’s International Press Association, whose first president was Mrs. E. I. Nicholson, publisher of the \textit{New Orleans Picayune}.

The \textit{Register}, of course, had long used some contributions by women. In the newspaper’s earliest years, they were mostly in the form of letters to the editor and poetry or other literature. The female correspondent “Virginia” provided some reports during the Civil War. In the 1870s, Mary C. West received a by-line for her homemaker columns.\textsuperscript{327}

Two of the \textit{Register}’s most talented women writers were Narcissa Tayloe Maupin Shawhan and Anne Bozeman Lyon. As a young girl, Shawhan began sending weekly newsletters to the \textit{Register} from her

\textsuperscript{326} DR July 14, 1889; May 19, 1893 1:6; August 15, 1902 6:1; May 15, 1885 6:1; April 14, 1893 4:4; April 25, 1895 1:7; May 16, 1899 2:2; December 2, 1893 4:3; June 1, 1901 8:3; March 15, 1902 8:3.

\textsuperscript{327} Mott, \textit{American Journalism}, 489-490; MDR Janu 15, 1873 3:2; Ellison, \textit{Alabama Newspapers}, 72, 74.
parents’ rural summer home at Deer Park. Before her marriage to Charles Shawhan in 1891, she also wrote articles and edited social pages for the Register.

Lyon was a prolific and widely published writer. Newspapers publishing her earliest verses included the Memphis Appeal and the Louisville Courier-Journal in the late 1880s. Character sketches, verses, short stories, and African American dialect stories appeared in the New Orleans Times-Democrat. For the Register she wrote news, features, and historical articles.

Her short stories with a regional flavor appeared in Vanity Fair, Southern Magazine, the National Magazine, and many others in the 1890s. Lyon’s works helped establish the short story as an important type of prose in American literature.328

The Register also made use of the talents of some black writers, not as regular reporters, but as special correspondents. One such was A. F. Owens, a minister who edited the Baptist Pioneer. Besides providing news articles for the Register, he wrote for white newspapers in Montgomery and Birmingham.329

White men, however, dominated newspaper reporting. Representative of many reporters of the period was George Jeremiah Flournoy, who was given the nickname of “Gummy” because of his fondness for chewing gum.

As a 13-year-old, Flournoy ran errands for a real estate office in 1888 but yearned to write sports. So he volunteered to be a scorekeeper for the city’s amateur baseball games and wrote accounts of them for the Mobile newspapers.

Although his formal schooling ended at the third grade, Flournoy landed a job as a copy reader for the Mobile Item. He worked until 2 a.m. each morning, caught a couple of hours sleep in the press room, and then carried newspapers to subscribers. With a bit of hustling he could earn about $23 a week.330

In the economic hard times of the early 1890s, Flournoy found himself unemployed and took a job barking logs at a sawmill for a $1 a day. He soon returned to newspaper work, this time as a combination police and society reporter for the Mobile Daily News. By 1897, he had switched over to gathering news for the Mobile Herald. Flournoy worked again for the Item after the Register acquired it.

Such switching around among newspapers and other jobs was not unusual. A reporter’s tenure was insecure and editors frequently shook up their staffs.331

Fellow newspapermen called Flournoy “the best leg man in the business,” a term applied to reporters who used the telephone to call in their stories to the “rewrite man,” who actually wrote the story from the notes the reporter gave over the telephone. The telephone first made its appearance in Mobile in 1879, three years after its invention, and the Register signed up as one of the

331 MPR August 22, 1953 A1, 1:1.
first subscribers.\textsuperscript{332}

Just as the telegraph changed news gathering, so did the telephone. The *Register* promoted the novelty of getting news by phone just as it had the telegraph. Instead of the “latest by telegraph,” the *Register* now touted “Special by telephone to the *Register*,” often for news called in from no greater distance than Whistler, just north of the city.\textsuperscript{333}

Flournoy looked on another invention introduced to newspaper offices shortly after the phone as his mortal enemy: the typewriter. Flournoy was not alone in being wary about typewriters. Journalism historian W. Joseph Campbell noted that among the issues discussed at the American Newspaper Publishers’ Association annual meeting in New York in February 1897 was: “Do typewriters lower the literary grade of work done by reporters?”

By that year, typewriter models had become easier to use and were gaining favor with reporters. But not everyone in the newsroom welcomed the new technology.

“Just as some journalists expressed skepticism about the internet” in the late 1990s, wrote Campbell, “some veteran reporters in 1890s resented the noisy, intrusive typewriter.” Older reporters still preferred to write their stories by longhand.

Flournoy never mastered the use of a typewriter, nor the English language for that matter. He either phoned in or handed most of his material to a rewrite man. Flournoy let the copy desk worry about grammar,

\textsuperscript{332} *DR* November 23, 1879 4:4.

\textsuperscript{333} *DR* August 15, 1884 4:2.
style, and punctuation while he dug out the news.\textsuperscript{334}

To prepare copy for publication, the Register required a large staff of editors including the editor in chief, an associate editor, commercial editor, agricultural editor, city editor, and others. These editors oversaw a core of reporters in Mobile and perhaps 30 correspondents who contributed occasional news items from Alabama and Mississippi. The paper also maintained a regular correspondent in Washington to provide news from the nation’s capital.\textsuperscript{335}

The Civil War stimulated an interest in news over opinion and after the war the Register continued to expand space given to news of all kinds. This emphasis on news probably made it harder in some ways for Mobile to hang on to the talented people needed to build its economy.

Newspapers in rising cities such as Atlanta and Nashville publicized their cities’ growing clout. Articles promoted successful businessmen and their companies, as well as featured the social activities of those cities’ prominent citizens.

The Register reprinted these articles. Ambitious young men could read for themselves where to go for the best chance of getting ahead.\textsuperscript{336}

And they could read the news stories in the Register that things were not going well in Mobile. In remarks that were carried by other newspapers, a visitor in 1883

\textsuperscript{334} MPR February 5, 1961 A, 7:6.
\textsuperscript{335} Erwin Craighead file in MPL, miscellaneous note, April 3, 1884; DR September 15, 1885 2:1; MDR December 24, 1876 3:1; DR June 15, 1890 2:1.
\textsuperscript{336} Doyle, New Men, 86, 95.
wrote that the city has “a gentle flavor of mild decay very mild, but very perceptible.” In an 1886 editorial headlined, “Keep the young men at home,” the Register noted that over the last 12 to 15 years the city had lost many young men who had to go elsewhere for work and urged employers to make jobs for them in Mobile. Defensively, the Register criticized the endless promotion of Atlanta by Henry Grady in the Constitution as unjustified puffery. The Constitution suggested that the Register get busy promoting Mobile.\footnote{DR September 21, 1883 4:3; August 22, 1886 4:2; Harold E. Davis, Henry Grady’s New South: Atlanta, A Brave and Beautiful City. (University of Alabama Press, 1990), 43.}

Actually, Rapier and his editors through the Register were earnest advocates of Mobile enterprise. They were no less so than Grady, Evan P. Howell, and William A. Hemphill were through the Constitution for Atlanta; or Francis W. Dawson and John C. Hemphill were through the News and Courier for Charleston.

But no matter how much the papers in Mobile and Charleston promoted their cities, they could not overcome their ports’ economic stagnation. Their boosterism couldn’t duplicate Atlanta’s role as a major railroad hub or its entrepreneurial spirit.

Even with its journalistic advances, the Register failed to match in Alabama the reporting enterprise directed by such men as Grady in Georgia. For the state election of 1888, for example, Grady hired a thousand horses and arranged for reporters in all of Georgia’s 137 counties to telegraph election results in time for the next day’s edition.

Such enterprise in Alabama was far beyond the
financial abilities of the Register or any other newspaper in the state. Greater news enterprise may have profited the Register by making it in greater demand by readers and advertisers throughout the state.  

In contrast with Grady and Henry Watterson, Rapier considered the Register to be a public trust not to be used for personal ends, so he would not write in it and left news management up to his editors. After the death of Forsyth, news management first fell on Joseph Hodgson.

Hodgson came to the Register from the Montgomery Mail to take over as acting editor when Forsyth fell ill in 1875. At the same time he held a political post as register of the Mobile Chancery Court and it was Hodgson who heard the dispute between Forsyth and Rapier in 1876. He probably took advantage of his position to invest in the Register as part of the settlement in the case.

Although he became editor of the Register after Forsyth’s death in 1877, Hodgson’s interest in the paper seemed more financial than journalistic. During his entire time at the newspaper he also continued to be the register in Chancery, which gave him strong political connections with the Democrat Party.

In 1884, Hodgson ceased his duties as chief editor and concentrated his time on writing editorials. The fact that he also was a Democrat Party politician probably explains the frequent focus of editorials on narrow party concerns.

City Editor Erwin B. Craighead took over the news management duties. It was Craighead who directed the

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338 Davis, Grady’s, 51.
339 MR May 7, 1905 1:1.
expanding news functions of the paper during this period. Hodgson left the Register in 1893 to become part owner and editor of the newly established Birmingham State.

Between 1877, when Forsyth died, and 1893, when Craighead became editor, the Register had made the transition from a newspaper designed to influence a small group of leaders on commercial and political issues to a journal of general interest aimed at gaining the largest possible audience. During the last 10 years of the 19th century and first 10 years 20th century, Craighead became the very personification of the Register.340

340 McMillan, Constitutional Development, 189; MDR May 4, 1877 1:2; DR September 2, 1880 3:1; MR April 25, 1913 8:1.
CHAPTER 10
Decades of Sensation

The events of the 1890s and early 1900s in many ways resembled those of the 1860s and 1870s: war, political turmoil, social upheaval, and racial unrest. For Mobile there were critical differences in the later period. The city’s population was smaller in 1890 than 1870, its economy stagnated, and its status diminished in relation to other Southern cities.

Birmingham, the “Magic City,” with its steel plants grew rapidly and by 1890 surpassed Mobile as the state’s largest city. Cotton exports, which had helped make Mobile into a major antebellum port, shrunk, although other products, especially timber, were growing. In 1900, Mobile’s bank capital, needed to supply credit for investments, stood at about $800,000, less than half what it had been in 1870.

Fashioning the Register’s response to these conditions was Editor Erwin Craighead. Courly, erect, and sporting a beard reminiscent of Robert E. Lee, Craighead seemed to embody the values of the Old
South.

Craighead and others of the New South helped turn the Old South into a romantic myth. His preoccupation with the city’s history before the Civil War suited Mobilians. Many of the people he came in contact with through the newspaper and his writings sought to escape the hard, current reality in what they imagined to be a more glorious past.

Born on April 4, 1852, in Nashville, Tennessee, Craighead was too young to have served in the Confederacy. During Reconstruction he studied at the grammar school of Racine College in Wisconsin.

At 16, Craighead read law at Nashville College and four years later received a bachelor’s degree in literature. Then he went abroad to study law at Middle Temple, Inns of Court in London, and philosophy at the University of Leipzig in Germany. Craighead became fluent in French, German, and Italian.

Although admitted to the Tennessee bar in 1877, Craighead never practiced. Instead he turned his attention to journalism. The 26-year-old Craighead moved to New Orleans in 1878 to join the staff of the New Orleans Times as a sports reporter by day and an operatic critic by night for $10 a week. The same year, Craighead married Lura Harris of Nashville and 11 months later they had a son, Frank. After two years at the Times, Craighead became the associate editor.

When the New Orleans Daily States needed more money after only a few months of operation, Craighead decided in February 1880 to use an inheritance to buy half interest in the newspaper. Two years of managing the business of a newspaper taught Craighead that his tastes and capacity were that of a writer and not a
publisher. So he sold his interest. Thomas Rapier, manager of the *New Orleans Picayune* and brother of John L. Rapier, told Craighead that his brother needed a good newspaperman and suggested that Craighead try the *Register*. In 1882, Craighead joined the *Register* as city editor, a position of rising importance in the modern newspaper. In 1884, he became managing editor.

When Rapier enlisted the city’s leading financiers and businessmen such as James K. Glennon to form the Register Co. in 1889, Craighead also invested in the company and became vice president, with Rapier as president. After editor Joseph Hodgson headed for Birmingham in 1893, Craighead also took over as chief editorial writer while retaining his position as managing editor.

Craighead and his wife, Lura, fit in well with Mobile’s Victorian society and plunged deeply into its activities. Craighead relished his association with men of culture and those of the Old South whom he lionized in his columns and books.

John Rapier and his wife Regina introduced the Craigheads to prominent leaders of Mobile business and

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society, especially Mardi Gras mystic societies. Rapier belonged to both the Strikers Independent Society and Order of Myths Mardi Gras associations.

At midnight on winter nights after putting the morning Register to bed, Craighead met with writer and editor Thomas C. DeLeon at Mike’s saloon. Over a Christmastime cocktail of a hot Tom and Jerry, they talked about the days of Civil War and Reconstruction.


Despite traveling among the city’s well-to-do and fashionable circles, Craighead rejected social airs for himself. Custom dictated that a newspaper’s city editor be called “major” and the managing editor “colonel.” But Craighead refused those titles and informed his friends that he wore no sword other than the pen and no plume other than his Panama hat. The title “mister” suited him fine enough, he said.343

Lura Harris Craighead perfectly matched her husband’s intellect and outgoing personality. Well educated, she attended schools in Nashville and New York before graduating from Patapsco Female Institute in Ellicott City, Maryland. An energetic woman, she participated in almost every women’s reform cause

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343 Erwin Craighead, From Mobile’s Past: Sketches of Memorable People and Events (Mobile: The Powers Printing Co., 1925), 57; DR June 8, 1902 4:2; MPR February 21, 1932 3, 1:5
between 1895 and 1920. She undoubtedly influenced her husband into giving space to some of those causes in the columns of the Register, although he didn’t always agree with them, especially women’s suffrage.\textsuperscript{344}

Craighead once wrote of the efforts of British suffragettes that “The spectacle of a suffragette lawyer weeping like a mere woman as a climax to an appeal for consideration of the ‘political rights’ of women, shows that there are elements in the eternal feminine problem which no law can co-ordinate.” His wife, meanwhile, told members of the Alabama Federation of Women’s Clubs that “Every one of you must either assist or retard the development of your sex, and of the whole human race …,” and she became a leader in the women’s suffrage movement.\textsuperscript{345}

The Craigheads enjoyed entertaining guests at Arden, their St. Stephens Road home set in a grove of Spanish moss-draped oaks and framed by a hedge of tangled wildwood. At Arden they maintained a garden, Satsuma orchard, cats, dogs, and chickens.

The Craigheads kept a House Book in which they set down the names of every visitor, what they said about the house, its owners, and quotable conversations. The book eventually ran to more than 11 volumes.\textsuperscript{346}

Craighead thought life in Mobile enjoyable, but


\textsuperscript{345} \textit{MR} November 1, 1908 6:1; \textit{MDR} Oct. 31, 1899 3:3; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 340.

\textsuperscript{346} \textit{New Orleans Daily States} November 18, 1923.
found his income as an editor dismally poor. In his private papers he wrote that “this existence is a very pleasant one. The work is easy and interesting, the office pleasant, the ‘boss’ intelligent and fair minded, the associates gentlemen, and the young men polite and accommodating. The pay might be higher, but one must not expect to have everything in this world … .”

As city editor, Craighead could pick up as many odd jobs of writing as he was capable of doing. He increased his earnings by acting as a special correspondent for other newspapers. He regularly sent news items to 10 daily newspapers including the New York Times, St. Louis Globe-Democrat, Chicago Tribune, and Houston Post. By this vigorous labor he averaged about $180 a month, or about $2,160 a year. The lowest, paid city editors in New York earned about $3,000 a year.

Reporters fared much worse, some starting at about $5 a week. The low pay resulted from the Register’s heavy debt and small profits, which obliged Rapier to employ family members including his children and cousins, to whom he occasionally found it necessary to apologize for the low wages.

The usual practice of paying reporters more for front-page stories often meant that they either sought out the most sensational stories or sensationalized the stories that came to hand. The Register, however,

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347 Craighead file, MPL, miscellaneous note about Sept. 11, 1883.
348 Mott, American Journalism, 489, 603.
349 Letter from John L. Rapier to Cameron A. Moreno Sr., Mobile, Alabama, September 9, 1880 in the possession of Regina Moreno Mandrell, Montrose, Alabama.
disparaged those newspapers that resorted to sensationalism. “Their idea of a ‘live’ paper is one that tramples decency under foot, and has no regard for the feelings of anyone; that intrudes upon privacy, and calls impertinence energy; that jumps at opinions, and prints them before there is any effort to have them verified.”

The Register instructed reporters “to never assume responsibility for any statement, but always to give authority—a reporter being merely a describer of events, not a judge thereof.” When reporters had no authority available for attribution, they were to use such qualifiers as “it seems,” “it appears,” and “apparently.”

In practice, however, the Register tended to be only somewhat less sensationalistic than the leading newspapers in New York. Even reports from the recorder’s court were made entertaining:

The following cases were before the court:

Minnie Lewis, colored, dangerous and suspicious character:
$20 or thirty days.
Our civil war explained to us how minnies are quite dangerous.

Briton Neese, disorderly conduct; $10 or ten days.
As long as England’s banner waves, Proud Britons never will be slaves,
But yet this Briton, christened Neese,

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351 DR August 18, 1898 4:2.
Ralph E. Poore

From rowdy conduct now must cease.\textsuperscript{352}

The paper in the 1880s also began making use of a new reporting technique: the interview. For example, after police arrested a youth for stabbing a man to death in a saloon, a reporter went to the jail for an interview.

“The boy was called to the door of the cell and we asked him if he chose to tell anything about the affair,” the reporter wrote. “He is a boy about fifteen years old, says he is a creole ...” and the story went on to give the teen-ager’s account of the incident. The reporter also questioned those in the saloon who witnessed the incident. He summed up his findings with “Thus was the quarrel ended and the bloody knife claimed another victim.”\textsuperscript{353}

The paper also made use of sensational headlines stacked so as to draw attention to stories:

A TRAGEDY

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Henry C. Boice Meets His Death
At Early Morn,

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His Slayer Being Walton W. Williams,
And Jealousy the Controlling
Motive

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A Thrilling Story of a Broken House-
hold, An Agreement for a Divorce,
and Sudden Change in the Intentions
of Williams, followed by the Start-

\textsuperscript{352} DR July 1, 1879 4:3.

\textsuperscript{353} DR December 11, 1881 5:1.
ling Double Report of the Revolver, and the Finding of the Dead Han on the Floor with the Leaden Messengers of Death in His Brain\textsuperscript{354}

Despite its use of yellow journalism techniques in reporting crime stories, the Register, much to its credit, resisted the jingoistic propaganda over Cuba carried on by William Randolph Hearst’s New York Journal and Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World. Even after the U.S. battleship Maine blew up in Havana harbor February 15, 1898, the Register, under Craighead’s editorial guidance, opposed going to war with Spain over the incident.

“The country is rapidly becoming hysterical over the Havana business,” the Register editorialized 10 days after the sinking. “The sensation newspapers are doing their best to increase the excitement, and the jingoes are talking on every street corner in the land … . It looks to us as if we would be forced into war with Spain on the general issue that we do not like that country. This is a poor issue but it will serve those who want war.”\textsuperscript{355}

Craighead also believed war might retard the regional economy’s anemic recovery from the Panic of 1893. The depression already had stirred up a revolt by farmers and working men against the free market, banks, and railroads. This populist threat to the Democrat Party’s control of state politics is discussed more below.

The Register understood the news value of the events in Havana. When the British steamship Casos arrived in Mobile from the Cuban port, the Register sent

\textsuperscript{354} DR August 1, 1889 4:3.

\textsuperscript{355} DR February 24, 1898 4:2.
a reporter to interview the crew on what they knew of the *Maine*’s sinking.\textsuperscript{356}

After the United States declared war, some of the *Register*’s reporters enlisted in the Army to fight the Spaniards. Other reporters became “war correspondents,” though they got no closer to Cuba than did the soldiers who began arriving in Mobile for encampment in April.

For a time, arranging for reports of the war left Craighead with no time to write editorials and the paper appeared without them. The demand for war news also caused the *Register* to put out a Monday morning edition. The long tradition of giving the paper’s workers most of Sunday off had dictated that no Monday morning edition be published. But the demand for war news overcame that tradition.\textsuperscript{357}

To provide coverage of Alabama troops as they moved on to Miami and Cuba, Craighead hired former *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* reporter Moses Koenigsberg. As the surest way of getting to Cuba with the troops, Craighead recommended that Koenigsberg join the Gulf City Guards, commanded by Captain John D. Hagan, a close friend of Craighead’s and an ardent admirer of the *Register*.

Koenigsberg made his way to the western suburb of Crichton where Alabama troops were encamped along Three Mile Creek. Dressed in a tan derby, pleated shirt, and suede-topped shoes, Koenigsberg became a point of sport among the “hillbillies, wharf rats, and city dudes”

\textsuperscript{356} *DR* February 26, 1898 5:1.

\textsuperscript{357} *DR* April 21, 1898 5:1; April 24, 1898 4:2, 4:1; July 1, 1898 2:3; Dec. 1, 1898 1:4; Aug. 14, 1898 4:1.
who made up the Gulf City Guards.

A general free-for-all developed as the troops attempted to relieve the reporter of his clothes. Officers broke up the fight and confined Koenigsberg to his quarters. The troops shipped out to Miami in June 1898 and Koenigsberg went with them. But Miami was as close to Cuba as he would come.358

The war ended before the Register’s ability to cover it could be tested. Certainly, the Register’s financial condition would not allow it to provide the thoroughgoing coverage of the Spanish-American War that it had provided of the Civil War.

Coverage of the war was immensely expensive even for the huge circulation New York papers, some of which spent as much as $250 a day for cables. Hearst’s Journal spent $3,000 a day. With peace at hand in August, the Register dropped its Monday morning edition, maintaining that it had been printed at a financial loss.359

Although the Register’s influence in the nation and the South diminished with Mobile’s economy, the newspaper still had considerable political influence in the state. Independent of the Democrat Party, the newspaper wasn’t impartial and often voiced the party’s views. The Register also was in the largest city in the

359 Johnson and Robb, South and Its Newspapers, 71; Mott, American Journalism, 537.
state, until Birmingham’s population overtook Mobile’s in the 1890s, and compelled politicians to pay attention.

The Register and other newspapers in the state cast the Democrat Party in the role of the defenders of the white race. They supported the white citizens’ belief that the party had redeemed the state from the rule of Radical Republicans, carpetbaggers, and scalawags. The Philadelphia Press, in fact, called the Register “the Bourbon organ of Alabama.”

Opponents used the term “Bourbon” critically to include several factions of the Democrat Party who generally agreed on low taxes, a minimum of state services, and that government should stay out of business affairs. Critics meant the term to invoke a historical reference to the French Bourbon aristocrats returned to power after the fall of Napoleon in 1814. The Bourbons were said to stubbornly hold to the past and refused to adapt themselves to a changing world. The Register properly dismissed the label as a hackneyed phrase.

For the most part, political editorials in the Register during the 1890s and early 1900s sounded more like letters to the state’s Democrat Party leadership than comment on issues of public concern. The political editorials often dealt with narrow party concerns, more so even than before the Civil War. Opening discussion to more serious issues would have invited dissension and discord, threatening party unity.360

Such intimate involvement in political affairs was

typical of the times. For example, Henry Grady, Evan P. Howell, and William A. Hemphill, the owners of the *Atlanta Constitution*, exercised considerable influence in Georgia in the 1880s through the loosely knit political organization called the Atlanta Ring. From his *News and Observer* in Raleigh, South Carolina, Josephus Daniels supported white supremacy and fervently campaigned for William Jennings Bryan in his three races for the presidency.\[361\]

Railroads, particularly the Louisville and Nashville, politicians, and newspapers strengthened each other’s interests. Railroads liberally distributed free passes to newspaper editors, bought advertising, and made direct payments. As governor, Thomas G. Jones, a former L&N official, asked the railroad to give money to the *Montgomery Advertiser* to keep that newspaper solvent and to maintain its friendly editorials toward the railroad.\[362\]

In Mobile, a city official in 1899 hinted that the unanimity of the Port City’s newspapers favoring the withdrawal of the city’s lawsuit against the L&N was achieved with cash from the railroad. “I could not help smiling,” said the official, “when I observed that all the newspapers were agreed upon this matter of withdrawing the suit against the railroad. I could easily guess what rat had been in the meal tub.”


The Register strongly denied influence or payments by the railroad. But, as might be expected, the L&N spent thousands of dollars for ads in newspapers across the state friendly to its interests.\footnote{363 DR January 15, 1899 4:1; “Milton H. Smith Testifies Regarding Political Contributions,” Railway Age, 64, March 1, 1918 n.p.}

The Register had good reason to support the interests of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad and the politicians who supported it regardless of the railroad’s financial carrots. In the last 30 years of the 19th century, the L&N invested $30 million in Alabama linking the mineral district of Birmingham with the Port of Mobile, providing better service, efficient interchange of traffic, and lower rates. The Register and the city’s businessmen saw the L&N as essential to the city’s economic progress.\footnote{364 Daniel S. Gray, Alabama: A Place, A People, A Point of View (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishing Co., 1977), 202; Brownell, City Southern History, 106; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913. (Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 125--126.}

The Democrat Party and those who supported its hold on political power came under serious challenge during the 1890s. The state’s agricultural forces blamed the Democrats for the desperate condition of farmers in the state.

Alabama farmers became highly visible in the nation in pressing for regulations against merchants, bankers, manufacturers, railroads, and all middlemen. Farmers blamed these groups for their rising debts,
falling crop prices, crop liens, and farm tenancy.

A full telling of the ills of Alabama farmers is beyond the range of this newspaper history, but a short comment is in order. Economic historians have found that the evidence doesn’t support the causes farmers point to for the reasons of their problems. Farm prices were falling, but so were the prices of most other goods. The evidence also suggests that farm incomes were not falling.

Most economic historians see rural unrest as reflecting the growing risks and uncertainties of farming during the late 1800s. Farming had become more commercial after the Civil War, making farmers more dependent on the services of creditors, merchants, and railroads. Commercial agriculture provided growers more chances to make money. They also shouldered more burdens, hardships, and risks. They faced greater foreign competition in a world market that American farm products no longer dominated.

When farm prices, yields, and incomes became unpredictable, there was more worry and unrest. In the 1890s in Alabama, there was a lot of worry and unrest and the farmers led a populist revolt against the Democrat Party.\(^{365}\)

Because farmers in Alabama and the rest of the country pointed to the wrong causes of their problems, they came up with the wrong responses. Populists

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wanted strong state and national governments with the power they believed would solve farmers’ problems.

They called, among other things, for national banks to be abolished and for government control of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones. Populist also wanted a national income tax and the free coinage of silver, believing that increasing the amount of currency in circulation would increase the price of their crops. They didn’t seem to understand it would increase the price of everything else, too.

The farmers succeeded in some of their proposals but even demands that fell on deaf ears at the time eventually shifted government toward greater control of Americans’ lives. Populist efforts set up the next wave of leftist politics in the early 20th century in the period known as the Progressive Era. Before 1915, progressives had enacted former populist demands such as the graduated income tax and the direct election of U.S. Senators.

In the 1890s, the Democrats’ staunch supporters at the Register in Mobile and the Advertiser in Montgomery directed the attack on the farmers’ reform program. The papers correctly understood that if the farmers saw that they couldn’t reform the Democrats, then they would turn to Republicans or else back third-party candidates.

If the reformers captured the election machinery or another party succeeded, they would upset the system of political rewards of the entrenched Democrat Party interests. And Democrats could not allow that to happen.366

366 Moore, History of Alabama, 607; Hackney, Populism to Progressivism, 10.
In 1892 and 1894, influential Birmingham banker and industrialist Joseph F. Johnston backed the Democrat fight against the reformers’ Jeffersonian Democrat Party, known elsewhere as Populists. He was deeply involved in the Democrats’ ballot tampering and fraud schemes to defeat the populists.

But the politically ambitious Johnston came to believe that Democrats could not continue to ignore farmers’ concerns and grab power through fraud. Johnston and his followers wanted to regulate railroads and other corporations, cleanse politics of election frauds, and work for humanitarian relief of the suffering. A liberal reform faction within the Democrat Party backed Johnson for governor in 1896.367

To promote his candidacy for governor in 1896, Johnston bought the Birmingham Age-Herald and changed its name to the State Herald. Besides endorsing Johnston, the State Herald attacked Governor William Oates, U.S. Representative Richard H. Clarke of Mobile, the Montgomery Advertiser, and the Register for their opposition to the free-silver Democrats.368

The Register liked neither Johnston’s free-silver stance nor his populist leanings and in 1896 backed favorite son Clarke. But when Johnston captured the nomination, assuring his election as governor, the

367 Moore, History of Alabama, 642-643; Hackney, Populism to Progressivism, 13, 133.
Register went along with the party’s choice.\textsuperscript{369}

The Register’s dislike of Johnston became frankly personal with publisher John L. Rapier when, as governor, Johnston forced Rapier to forfeit a bond he had posted for the Mobile County tax collector. The age and feebleness of the collector caused him to get behind in collecting taxes due the state and Rapier and other bondsmen were called on to make good the deficit. The bondsmen, believing they were not liable for the late collections, refused to pay.

The state brought suit against Rapier and the others. Johnston had the lawsuits transferred to Montgomery, requiring the bondsmen to travel there. The cases were set for trial in the fall 1897. But a yellow fever epidemic in Mobile, the last in its history, caused the city to be quarantined and no one from Mobile could enter Montgomery. Even the mails were barred from being delivered from Mobile.

Rapier’s attorneys couldn’t get the case postponed from its October 28 trial date. Then yellow fever hit Montgomery and the governor left town, further making it impossible for Rapier’s attorneys to deal with Johnston.\textsuperscript{370}

Rapier never forgave Johnston for his actions in the affair. When, after two terms as governor, Johnston sought the U.S. Senate seat of John T. Morgan, the Register backed Morgan.

The Register had no love for Morgan. It had been in the habit of flailing him for his free-silver ideas and

\textsuperscript{369} Moore, History of Alabama, 642-643; Hackney, Populism to Progressivism, 13, 133.

\textsuperscript{370} DR April 12, 1900 4:1.
failure to support President Grover Cleveland. But Rapier’s hatred of Johnston exceeded his dislike of Morgan.

Before the 1900 senatorial election, the Register recounted the incident with the tax collector and stated: “Let us say frankly that the governor’s action in the matter is in truth one of the reasons” for the paper’s opposition to his candidacy. Morgan won the contest. Johnston lost again as a candidate for governor in 1902. That ended his efforts to change the direction of Alabama’s Democrat Party.\textsuperscript{371}

Rapier and Craighead both had close personal and business ties with local businessmen and politicians whose interests were contrary to some of the goals sought by reformers such as Johnston. However, the Register sometimes joined with its regulatory adversaries in promoting humanitarian social programs. Rapier and Craighead did so both out of sense of paternalistic duty to help the less fortunate and out of a belief that such programs eliminated obstacles to economic development.\textsuperscript{372}

Thus, in 1881 the Register praised state lawmakers for funding $100,000 over two years for the expansion of Bryce Hospital for the insane in Tuscaloosa. The “melancholy alternative,” the paper said, would be to house the insane in county jails.

\textsuperscript{371} DR September 1, 1897 4:1; April 12, 1900 4:1.

\textsuperscript{372} Craighead’s political connections included being a member of the first ward Democrat Executive Committee. He was also a member of the city’s major commercial groups: the Commercial Club, the Cotton Exchange, and the Chamber of Commerce. DR March 15, 1901 5:1; MR October 27, 1905 2:1.
Five years later, the paper condemned the treatment of prisoners at a convict farm. At the Alabama Commercial and Industrial Association, meeting in Birmingham in 1896, Craighead urged the adoption of a new state constitution that would allow the public to tax itself for improvements such as schools, roads, water systems, and sewers.\footnote{DR February 18, 1881 2:2; February 27, 1886 2:1; McMillan, \textit{Constitutional Development}, 235.}

The \textit{Register} also harnessed reform-minded women’s religious and charitable organizations for social change. After reporting about a local judge whose only alternative to sentencing some black youths was prison or the county jail, the newspaper editorially called on the Legislature in January 1897 to establish a state reformatory school for juveniles.

The paper said it was the state’s “duty to rescue from vice those who are so unfortunately placed as to be unable to rescue themselves.” A few days later, some local women organized a Woman’s Reformatory Committee to get a reform school at Mount Vernon.

“By all means,” the paper said, “let us have this reformatory. Humanity, justice, self-protection, economy demand it.” By the end of January a bill creating a reformatory had been introduced in the Legislature.\footnote{DR January 2, 1897 2:1; January 10, 1897 4:1; January 14, 1897 4:1; January 24, 1897 4:1.}

Not until 10 years later did Mobile County get a juvenile home. Craighead’s wife, Lura, headed a group of reformers in 1907 seeking a juvenile court and detention home for the county. When the group met some official opposition, Craighead wrote a touching
editorial about two boys who had to be kept in the city jail because there was no detention home.\(^{375}\)

Another reform sought by progressives also found favor with the *Register*: the elimination of black Alabamians from political life and their segregation from white society. On this issue, the *Register* made the fullest use of the sensationalistic techniques of yellow journalism and Craighead directed their use.

Craighead had a growing influence over the editorial policy of the *Register* after 1900 because Rapier had contracted throat cancer. This left him too ill to be as involved in the newspaper and community affairs as he once had.

Rapier smoked heavily and almost always could be seen with a cigar in the corner of his mouth. He first developed lip cancer and sought out folk remedies from a Baldwin County man who had learned the medicinal use of plants from Indians. As Rapier’s illness worsened and spread to his throat, he sought out X-ray radiation therapy. Rapier spent about $12,000 in a futile search for a cure before dying May 7, 1905.

In September 1906, the Register Co. board of directors elected Paul E. Rapier, the publisher’s eldest son, to the presidency of the newspaper. Craighead had directed the newspaper’s affairs in the interim 16 months and continued to direct the paper’s editorial policy.\(^{376}\)

Craighead exercised considerable local influence,

\(^{375}\) *MR* July 28, 1907 2:1; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 338.

but he was unfortunately not up to the social and economic challenges facing Mobile in the first 10 years of the 20th century. The depression of the 1890s had forced many black farmers off their land and onto the roads to the cities in search of work. Growing white sentiment for blacks’ disfranchisement and segregation also encouraged many to leave the region. The black population of Southern cities swelled by 65 percent between 1900 and 1920 in the first stage of the Great Migration to the North.\footnote{Blain A. Brownell, The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930 (Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 7.}

Uprooted blacks roaming the cities in search of work worried many whites. The migration seemed to confirm in some white minds the racist view that the first generation of blacks born without the supposed restraining influence of slavery was degenerating. These racists imagined blacks were turning into subhuman animals that they often called “the brute” or “the black beast.” Sensationalistic reporting of crimes committed by blacks, especially rape, reinforced the racist view.\footnote{Joel Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation. (Oxford University Press, 1984), 115, 318-323.}

Southern whites have always understood blacks as “an obstreperous, but usually amiable and harmless entity,” the Register editorialized. The paper embraced the radical racist view that whites “are beginning to understand the negro’s recent transformation into ruthless madmen … .”\footnote{MR July 7, 1907 4:1.}
peace of every Southern community is the vagrant class, composed for the most part of negroes. At a time when there is actual need of laborers, it will be found that hundreds of able bodied men are idling their days asleep in the homes that are paid for by their wives or female associates, and their nights in the groggeries.”

The Register warned that idleness brings on burglaries, robberies, “and, worse, the assaults on women.” The paper said that idle blacks “should be made to work or made to move.”

Shifts in Mobile’s economy created uncertainty and worry among its residents. Faced with the real problems of unemployment, crime, poverty, and other issues, white Mobilians made blacks scapegoats and often reacted with violence against them.

The rushing flood waters of radical racism pushed and shoved the Register along the edges. The paper sometimes sailed along willingly. Other papers in the city, the Mobile Daily Herald and its publisher Max Hamburger, in particular, were swept into the mainstream.

Newly graduated from Barton Academy, Hamburger began his newspaper career as a correspondent of the Mobile Item in his Whistler community. At age 20 in 1895, he became the telegraph editor of the Register. Two years later he bought the Herald.

Hamburger, who romanticized the Old South and Confederacy for whom his father fought, portrayed the black community at Magazine Point north of the city as the home of dangerous criminals and its dance halls as

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scenes for weekly orgies.\textsuperscript{381}

Under such conditions, a single incident could send a torrent of white rage rushing against an imagined black threat. The rape of two white girls and a creole girl in August 1906 provided the incident that engulfed the entire city in violence.

Police arrested William Thompson, a 20-year-old black waiter, and charged him with the crimes. The \textit{Mobile Item} and the \textit{Mobile Herald} put out extra editions that sensationalized and distorted the facts presented at Thompson’s arraignment.

On the night of August 29, 500 heavily armed men tried to storm the county jail to lynch Thompson. But the sheriff, fearing mob action, told them Thompson had been taken by train to Birmingham. The next night another mob of about 300 again tried to break into the jail. This time the crowd didn’t believe that Thompson was in Birmingham and milled around the jail for two hours.

Craighead came to the jail at about 11 p.m. and tried to get the crowd to leave by giving his word that Thompson was in Birmingham, but the mob didn’t believe him either. At that point, Craighead offered to go to Birmingham with anyone who wanted to go along and he headed for the train station. But the men trailing behind him broke up before reaching the station and the trip became unnecessary.\textsuperscript{382}

\textsuperscript{381} David Alsobrook, “Mobile’s Forgotten Progressive — A.N. Johnson, editor and entrepreneur,” \textit{Alabama Review} 32:3 (July 1979) 195; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 156.

\textsuperscript{382} \textit{MR} August 30, 1906 2:1, 7:1; August 31, 1906 8:1; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 159-161.”
Tensions subsided, but on September 27 nature conspired to heighten irrational white fears as a hurricane slammed into the northern Gulf Coast at about Pascagoula, Mississippi. High winds and water caused the severest damage from Mobile to Pensacola.

The storm demolished about 20 houses in Mobile and damaged nearly every building in town. The hurricane blew in windows, knocked over chimneys, rolled up tin roofs, and ripped off others. Few interiors escaped damage from the rain.

Winds downed telegraph lines and electric wires. The winds also drove water from Mobile Bay northward and backed up the Mobile River. The storm tide rose nearly 10 feet above normal. Many merchants in the wholesale district had raised their wares off the floors, but the tide rose higher than all previous stages and damaged their goods.

The flood waters heavily damaged wharves, boats, and ships. The winds downed huge limbs and ancient oaks, which blocked streets.

Sensationalistic headlines in the \textit{Register} the morning after the storm shouted, “NEGROES LOOTING HOMES OF DEAD.” It turned out that blacks were only trying to recover their own belongings.

Two days later, the \textit{Register} reported that an 11-year-old school girl had been attacked by a black man and that she was found “torn, bleeding and unconscious.” Officials charged 17-year-old Cornelius Dick Robinson with the crime.\textsuperscript{383}

That night a crowd of about 500 men, some of them

\textsuperscript{383} \textit{MR} October 1, 1906 1:2; October 3, 1906 1:4; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 162-164.
drunk and carrying shotguns, gathered near the Register’s office and moved toward the county jail. The sheriff again had taken the precaution of putting his prisoner on a train to Birmingham.

Nevertheless, some in the mob took up a telephone pole blown down by the hurricane and rammed the jail door. Sheriff’s deputies fired shots into the air from inside the jail, and some in the crowd fired back killing one officer. The shooting dispersed the mob, but about 50 men boarded a Mobile and Ohio Railroad train in pursuit of the deputies and their prisoner.384

Craighead editorially denounced the mob storming the county jail as “not simply murder but assassination that was attempted.” But he continued to put forth the view that blacks were degenerating into beasts as an explanation for the events in Mobile.

“We deplore the horrible crime of yesterday, whereby a sweet young girl was the victim. Truly our situation is not enviable, harassed by a brutal class that wrecks what we hold most dear ... It is appalling, that we cannot stop this thing, and that even resort to barbarity on our own part has no curative effect. We must depend on the laws .... The subject is one that challenges the highest intelligence our people have.”385

Over the next few days, black ministers, doctors, teachers, and lawyers moved to assure the white community that blacks were law abiding. Whites, meanwhile, formed a 25-member committee for law and order to assist public officials in enforcing the law.

384 MR October 3, 1906 1:4; October 4, 1906 1:4; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 162-164.
of that committee, a permanent Law and Order Club formed whose membership included four newspapermen: Erwin B. Craighead and Paul Rapier of the Register, Max Hamburger, Jr., of the Daily Herald and Eyre Damer of the Daily News.\textsuperscript{386} Efforts by black and white civic leaders to avert violence proved useless. When Thompson and Robinson were being returned by train to Mobile on October 6, about 45 masked men armed with rifles boarded the train at Mount Vernon. The men seized the prisoners and forced the engineers to take the train on to Plateau.

“The plan was definitely outlined to the smallest details. It was not intended that any mistake should be made,” a reporter for the Register recorded, indicating his intimate knowledge of the armed men’s plans.

The masked men took Thompson and Robinson to a point near the Whistler and Magazine Point streetcar line and threw ropes over a tall tree. Before about 200 onlookers, 50 men jerked Thompson into the air.

The men briefly hauled Robinson into the air then lowered him to get a confession. The lynchers called over an Associated Press reporter to take down Robinson’s words, but he screamed that he was innocent. The men then jerked him into the air alongside Thompson. Streetcars that day were packed with the curious from Mobile who went out to see the bodies.\textsuperscript{387}

The Register editorialized that if a lynching had to take place, “it is much better for the community that it took place outside the city than within it. The shock to the morals of the people is thus made much less.”

\textsuperscript{386} MR October 5, 1906 2:3; October 6, 1906 1:7.
\textsuperscript{387} MR October 7, 1906 1:3; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 167.
The paper said the mob committed the lynching because it wanted to spare the rape victims the indignity of testifying, a justification often used across the South. Rather than calling for stronger laws against lynching, the Register called for stronger laws against rape.\textsuperscript{388}

In September 1907, another black man accused of rape was lynched in almost the same place as Thompson and Robinson. The Register called it “probably the quietest affair of its nature that has ever occurred in Mobile County … .”\textsuperscript{389}

A lynching in 1909 finally forced Craighead to face the problem of mobs carrying out their brand of justice. Two sheriff’s deputies about noon January 21 attempted to arrest a black carpenter, Richard Roberson, on charges of assault and battery. In a gun battle, Roberson wounded both. Roberson suffered three gunshot wounds, but wasn’t killed.

Large crowds surrounded the jail where Roberson was taken and people besieged the Register with phone calls wanting to know the condition of the deputies. One of the deputies, Philip Fatch, died about 11: 20 p.m.

Rumors became current the next day that Roberson would be taken from the jail and lynched. The afternoon newspapers, the Item and the Herald, even carried the time the lynching was planned. Just after midnight January 23, about 25 armed men entered the jail and, with the passive cooperation of sheriff’s deputies and city police, took Roberson into the street.

There, at the corner of Church and St. Emanuel streets in the shadow of Christ Church, the men shot

\textsuperscript{388} MR October 7, 1906 6:2.
\textsuperscript{389} MR September 23, 1907 5:1; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 173.
Roberson three times then hoisted his body into the air by a rope thrown over an oak limb. The body hung there for an hour.390

“Lynching is disgraceful enough to the community,” the Register editorialized. “Active or passive connivance of the authorities is unendurable.” Craighead called on the sheriff to explain why no steps were taken to protect Roberson and called on the governor to impeach the sheriff.

From his pulpit at the St. Francis Street Methodist Church, the Rev. H. H. McNeill quoted the editorial and praised the newspaper’s stance against the lynchers. “The Mobile Register has done its duty well,” McNeill said. “The editor has fearlessly and in well-defined terms denounced the deed and pointed out the probable criminals.”

Palmer Pillans, a prominent attorney, put some of the blame for the lynching on the reporting of the Register, however. “There was an itinerant reporter of the big-town type who couldn’t keep a job because of drink and who was then a reporter here on the Register’s staff at the time and covered, with moving skill, every item of the case every day.”391

The day after the lynching, Craighead and other men associated with the Committee for Law and Order began raising funds for attorneys to get evidence and help the police find the members of the mob. They also

asked the governor to offer a reward for information. As a result of the committee and Craighead’s agitation, the sheriff was eventually impeached for his part in the lynching.\textsuperscript{392}

As editor of the \textit{Register}, Craighead had strong ties with political leaders. He could have used his position to pressure public authorities to protect the rights of accused blacks and allow them to go to trial.

He appears, however, to have accepted the prevailing white belief that the first generation of blacks born without the controls of slavery was falling into bestial behavior. Such a belief practically excluded any presumption of innocence for blacks in the minds of Craighead and many other whites.

Craighead, the lawyer who never practiced, analyzed the problem of lynch mobs as a legalistic exercise. With the assumption of black guilt, the problem became one of how to contain white rage against black criminals until the courts could act to administer the proper justice. He sought control of the “black beast.” Lynching violated Craighead’s sense of the rule of law, but not his sense of justice.

The \textit{Register} and Craighead had good reason to fear white rage. Atlanta had suffered through four horrible days of rioting by more than 10,000 whites in September 1906. Rioters beat, stabbed, and killed black residents at random, with white law officers sometimes joining the mob.

Craighead sought paternalistic white control of blacks. Many other Southern editors were more extreme in their positions. \textit{Charleston News and Courier} editor John

\textsuperscript{392} MR January 25, 1909 1:6; Alsobrook, “Port City,” 178-190.
C. Hemphill blamed blacks for the poverty and industrial backwardness of the South. In the 1890s, he called for the removal of blacks from the country and their colonization elsewhere.

Hoke Smith, owner of the *Journal*, and Clark Howell, owner of the *Constitution*, both played on whites’ fears of blacks as they campaigned for governor of Georgia in 1906. They threatened to lead mob violence against blacks if necessary to control the African American residents.³⁹³

It’s not surprising, then, that Craighead is often considered a moderate on racial issues. Though paternalistic, he was sympathetic to blacks in Mobile. Craighead refrained from the vicious editorial attacks on blacks practiced by more radical editors.

Perhaps no white editor, North or South, understood that as long as blacks weren’t free as individuals to fully participate in a free society and economy, the South would remain an economically backward section of the United States. Only individuals endowed with liberty create wealth. Denying blacks the right to control their labor and their wealth shackled the Southern economy. And as blacks could have explained to any white who would have listened, there is no such thing as a little slavery.

Race relations bedeviled Mobile, the South, and the entire nation for nearly a hundred years more. They were not problems editors could solve. Overcoming complex racial conflicts required African Americans to have the individual freedom to direct their own affairs. That would only come with tremendous struggle. The

Register periodically chronicled the struggle as conflicts broke into the open.

As a businessman, John L. Rapier had worked to make the Mobile Register a modern and prosperous business. Under his guidance, the Register had become a complex manufacturing operation with layers of management. As publisher and one of the owners, he oversaw department bosses for news, advertising, circulation, and production. Each of these bosses oversaw more layers of managers and workers.

By 1910 the Register employed modern journalistic methods and technological advances. Rapier had added telephones, electric lights, mechanical typesetters, and large, fast presses that could print hundreds of newspapers a minute. Rapier also expanded the news in the Register by increasing the number of columns, articles, and syndicated features. He hired young men such as Craighead to oversee the news gathering. These investments were designed to make the newspaper attractive to an ever-wider range of paying readers and advertisers.

This expanding news operation required a lot of money and in getting it Rapier had the help of one the city’s most prominent businessmen: James K. Glennon. Besides being one of the owners of the Register, Glennon operated a major real estate and insurance company, served as vice president of the People’s Bank of Mobile, and owned the Grand Hotel at Point Clear. Glennon was in a good position to send advertisers to the Register.

Some things, however, were beyond the control of any one man or even of many men. In 1893, the United States entered the worst economic depression it had experienced up to that time. More than 600 banks and
16,000 businesses across the country failed by the end of the year. About 20 out of every 100 workers had lost his job. The four-year-long depression drove suffering farmers into the arms of the Populist Party, which Democrats and the Register fought in Alabama.

Though the Register and Democrats opposed the Populist Party as a party, they didn’t necessarily oppose expanding and using government power as the populists had sought to do. One of the reasons the Populist Party disintegrated may have been that Democrats began adopting many of the populists’ proposals. The Register also began supporting government intervention—picking the winners and losers—as a means of rebuilding Mobile’s economic prominence.

The Register and Democrats expected the government to pick winners and losers especially on matters of race, with whites coming out on top. The economic depression of the ’90s put Southern rural blacks, joined by many whites, on the roads to Mobile and other cities in the first phase of the Great Migration to Northern big cities. These new residents competed for limited jobs in a slowed economy.

Racial tensions and conflicts rose through the 1890s and into the early 1900s, and on occasion flared into murderous violence against blacks. When conflicts between the races occurred, police officers and the courts stepped in to defend white supremacy, not impartial justice.

Government command of the economy and of African American citizens would become larger themes in the years ahead for Mobile and the Register. Attempts at such command proved unsuccessful in both cases and
only caused new problems.

Rapier’s attempts to make the Register prosperous by adopting modern equipment and journalistic practices likewise proved unsuccessful. Running a modern newspaper was expensive and the Register couldn’t overcome the drag on its profits of the depression.

Around the turn of the century, Mobile’s economy began bustling again. In 1902, the Coca-Cola Bottling Works opened as did the Mobile Gas Light and Coke Co., the Armour Packing Co., Alabama Iron Works, and the Southern Oil and Chemical Co. The Gulf, Mobile and Ohio Railroad completed an ornate new terminal in 1907.

In 1908, Mobile got its first skyscraper as workers completed the 11-story Van Antwerp building. Located at the corner of Dauphin and Royal streets, the site at one time was the scene of Mobile’s newspaper row.

That was the same year the Battle House reopened. Owners rebuilt it following a fire that destroyed the hotel in 1905.

When he fell ill with cancer around 1900, John L. Rapier needed more than Glennon’s money and influence. Rapier called on his son Paul to take over the management of the paper. The elder Rapier had concerns that Paul’s high living distracted him too much from the business of the paper. So, he insisted that his second son, John B. Rapier, just graduated from college as an electrical engineer, and his third son, Reginald G. Rapier, a bookkeeper for some Mobile merchants, join Paul in the operation of the Register. Rapier’s daughter, Mary R. Rapier, also worked on the paper writing book reviews.
When Rapier died in 1905, the Register needed new presses and other equipment. Because the newspaper lacked funds, Paul Rapier attempted in 1910 to arrange financing through some New York interests, but he couldn’t find any takers.

One man, Frederick Ingate Thompson, however, expressed great interest in buying the Register. Paul Rapier nearly sold the paper at a grossly undervalued amount, but second thoughts and urging from relatives got him to up his asking price, to which Thompson agreed.

When Thompson took control of the Mobile Register in April 1910 he was a rising media baron who very nearly established a Southern newspaper empire. He provided the Register a much-needed infusion of cash. Thompson would make the newspaper attractive to an even wider audience and work a dramatic change in the Register’s political and social stands.

John L. Rapier had built the Register into a modern newspaper. Frederick I. Thompson would take it into the age of big business at the head of a chain of state newspapers. Under Thompson, the Register would become a profitable powerhouse of advocacy, progressive muckraking, and sensationalism, as well as serious news gathering, rebuilding some of its political influence in the region and the nation.
CONCLUSION
The Business of Newspapering

Many of the grand narratives of journalism history follow the conventional analysis that political parties practically created Southern newspapers. The typical narrative paints editors as highly partisan party lackeys and their readers as loyal party members following orders to subscribe.

Such sweeping generalizations don’t provide an accurate picture of newspapers, or of their readers, in the 1800s. The local facts often don’t match the big interpretations, at least not in Mobile and probably not elsewhere.

There were no neat divisions between commercial and political journals. There were no sharp lines marking changes from one newspaper era to another, or even between one party and another. In Alabama, the political parties endured frequent splits and reorganization. Sometimes it is hard to define a party or where editors stood. Events could shift loyalties and stands on the issues.
Rarely were newspaper operators solely one thing or the other. Operators’ reasons for starting a newspaper were as varied as the individuals who conducted them. Politics could influence content, but so could finances, business connections, and advertising sales. Treating the business of newspapering as secondary to other issues fails to present a complete picture.

All publishers, except those wealthy enough from other business pursuits, had to seek financing from somewhere. Wealthy Mobile businessman Thaddeus Sanford frequently advanced cash to Register owner John W. Townsend. Townsend’s inability to repay those loans led him to sell the Register to Sanford.

Political parties did found newspapers. That often meant no more than wealthy silent partners, who sometimes were candidates for office, supplying the financing. While influencing editorial policy on politics, they paid little attention to the day-to-day operations, leaving that up to the publisher. That’s how Charles C. Langdon became publisher and part owner of the Mobile Mercantile Advertiser, which eventually merged with the Register.

Political papers were just one class of newspapers in Mobile, New Orleans, Charleston, and elsewhere. Mobile also had nonpartisan papers, commercial papers, agricultural papers, penny papers, literary papers, humor papers, and others. They published as weeklies, bi-weeklies, tri-weeklies, and dailies. Dailies were not the most common form of newspapers, and most Americans didn’t read the dailies. All of these publications experienced varying degrees of success, especially in Mobile, still a frontier town in the 1820s and 1830s.
Communications researcher John C. Nerone has pointed out that the rise of popular partisan politics and the market economy in the early 1800s affected every class of newspaper in different ways. Cheaper prices and growing circulation, faster presses, street sellers, reporters, and newsy content can be found at all newspapers, including party papers, to one degree or another.

The opportunity to make money in commercial farming, trade, shipping, and business beckoned many people coming into the new lands of Alabama and the town Mobile. The founding in 1821 of the *Mobile Commercial Register* recognized this fact.

The *Register* always showed some interest in governmental and political activities in the first dozen years after its founding, but it didn’t serve as the organ of political party. The political realities of the mid-1830s tended to push *Register* and its owners deeper into party politics, if only out of self-interest.

Recognized in his time and by modern historians as “a key figure in the golden age of partisan newspapers,” John Forsyth took control of the *Register* for the first time in 1837. Forsyth is the person many historians point to as an example of the age of personal and partisan journalism among Southern editors. Forsyth loudly championed the Democrat Party, forcefully defended the South in the years before the Civil War, and after secession vigorously supported the Confederate cause. After the war, he fiercely resisted Reconstruction, Republicans, and racial equality.

It would be foolish to believe that Forsyth took his marching orders from anyone other than his own sense of right and wrong. A fact that at times put him at odds
with his fellow Democrat newspapermen and party supporters.

Status as a party paper didn’t guarantee survival of publications before or after the Civil War. Political patrons also could disappear during economic hard times or during factional splits in the party. Reaping public printing contracts from the party in power helped the bottom line but couldn’t ensure survival. Whigs most often won Mobile local elections, yet it was the Whig Advertiser and other Register competitors who eventually went out of business.

Forsyth used the Register as a personal and party organ, but he always wisely associated with one or more partners who looked after the business side of the newspaper. Forsyth cared more for his political causes than money, although he always believed he’d be rewarded one way or the other for his promotion of Democrats and the South.

Forsyth was very much a hands-on party manager. Party business and political pursuits frequently took him away from the newspaper office. He developed a large stable of talented writers who could pick up his pen in his absence.

Those who wrote editorials in the absence of Forsyth before the Civil War included Judge Joseph W. Lesesne, Judge William Seawell, William J. Kennedy, Edward Bailey, Theodore O’Hara, Henry Hotze, and perhaps others. Those who occasionally sat in his editorial chair after the war included Thomas Cooper DeLeon, Major Eugene Baylor, Colonel Joseph Hodgson, William Thomas Walthall, John E. Hatcher, and Reuben Nason. Historians often attribute all Register editorials to Forsyth, when in fact they may have been written by
someone else.

Thaddeus Sanford and Forsyth had many things in common, but Sanford was extremely business-minded. Sanford used the Register to promote the economic growth of Mobile and his many business investments. Sanford also had political ambitions and Forsyth was a vocal city booster. Both men took two turns at running the Register with their partners. Yet Sanford’s focus on business made him one of Mobile’s wealthiest citizens, while Forsyth often struggled to keep himself and the newspaper financially afloat.

Interestingly, the two men never teamed up to operate the Register, though they supported each other through the newspaper’s columns. That is probably a sign the two men would not have agreed on its management.

Very nearly every business investment Forsyth made outside of newspapering ended poorly. Even newspapering didn’t always turn out well for him, including one venture where Forsyth defied his stereotype as a partisan editor. In late 1841, after four years as one of the Democrat Party’s most devoted and vocal editors, Forsyth announced he was no longer going to be a party man.

Forsyth and his Register partner Hamilton Ballentyne launched the independent Mobile Daily Ledger on December 6, 1841. They told readers the paper was “neither devoted to the support of any particular political party … nor yet confined to a strait-laced neutrality.”

Forsyth and Ballentyne apparently wanted to make money. They sought to duplicate the phenomenal success of the New Orleans Picayune. The Picayune hit
Crescent City sidewalks in January 1837 as a brash journal of entertainment without a whiff of politics in its columns. Owners Francis Asbury Lumsden and George Wilkins Kendall, who had been a typesetter on the *Mobile Register* in 1833, modeled the *Picayune* after the penny press of the big cities of the North.

Forsyth’s penny paper project never got a fair test. Forsyth’s need to settle his father’s estate interrupted the newspaper experiment as well as Forsyth’s life and career. But even if Forsyth had been able to carry on with the *Ledger*, the paper is likely to have changed the nature of its content over time.

The *Picayune* and all other penny papers eventually found that entertainment provided an unsatisfying reason to publish a newspaper. They started carrying editorials and sought to influence public affairs just like the establishment papers. They also raised their prices, bringing them more in line with regular dailies. Establishment papers changed, too, adopting some of the popular features of the penny papers.

Though Mobile had been a settled place since 1702, it sat on the costal edge of an interior that remained largely frontier until the mid-1800s. The *Register* and its competitors operated at a greater distance from material, labor, major news sources, and subscribers than did publishers of major papers in the Northeast.

As people poured into Alabama, everything they needed for new settlements was scarce: skilled labor, manufactured goods, doctors, lawyers, banks, money, and information. Scarcity made everything dear, including newspapers and everything they needed.

Except for New Orleans, there were no big cities in the South. Mobile grew quickly from 1,500 people in
1820 to 12,672 in 1840 and to 29,258 in 1860. That was far below New Orleans’ 1860 population of 168,675. Even so, the *Picayune*, the largest paper in the South, had a circulation of just 12,600 in 1860. The *Register’s* circulation for same year was probably less than 2,000, and possibly only about 1,500 or less of that was in Mobile County.

Mobile’s population size limited the *Register’s* ability to sell newspapers within the city, and the paper searched out far-flung subscribers. This circumstance helped give the *Register* a regional outlook. It also limited the *Register’s* income and what it could spend on printing equipment, skilled typesetters, and news gathering. Because typesetters were both scarce skilled labor and union members, they could command high wages, limiting further the *Register’s* ability to spend money on equipment and news gathering.

Limited means compelled the *Register* to use its equipment until it was worn out. When needs and means met, the *Register’s* publishers bought modern equipment that allowed them to print more copies faster and with less effort.

In news gathering, insufficient income stimulated inventiveness and ingenuity. The *Register* had a highly organized system of news gathering. Before the telegraph, newspaper exchanges provided news from the region, around the country, and around the globe. Ship masters provided newspapers from their ports of call as well as passing on their own observations.

Journalism historians sometimes deride this system as copying rather than newsgathering. But years later, newswires provided essentially the same service.

The city’s businessmen visited the *Register’s* reading
room to scan materials and leave their own bits of news. Commercial printing meant the newspaper kept informed of events, new business, and promotions in the city. Because editors such as Thaddeus Sanford, Alexander B. Meek, and John Forsyth had wide business, legal, and political interests in the community, they were privy to important news and could act as their own reporters.

The telegraph brought to Mobile newspapers the same profound changes it had worked on Eastern papers. It freed the Register from dependence on the Eastern press for news. But telegraph tolls were expensive, at least $1.50 for 10 words in 1850. Southern papers tended to share expenses by hiring a reporter to send news by telegraph from New York, Baltimore, Washington, and elsewhere. This step reinforced Southern newspapers regional views of events.

The emphasis the telegraph placed on news stimulated the use of reporters. Shortly after the lines arrived in the Port City, the Register hired a regular city reporter.

Frequently journalism historians compare audiences for the Register and other Southern newspapers to the large-circulation papers of the Northeast. A commonplace view among historians is that especially the New York penny press was the forerunner of the modern 20th century commercial newspaper.

The comparison is meant to show the inferiority and backwardness of the Southern Press. The mistaken syllogistic logic is that the journalism of penny papers was modern, Southern papers didn’t practice the journalism of penny papers, therefore, Southern papers weren’t modern. Elitist journalism historians, often of
one mind with elitist journalists themselves, point to the liberal Northeastern newspapers they admire as the only acceptable journalism model. It is a very narrow, rigid way of looking at how newspapers develop.

In thinly settled Alabama and the northern Gulf Coast, the Register’s paying readers consisted of a limited audience of people well enough off to afford its price. The daily newspaper’s yearly subscription price was more than most skilled worker’s made in a week. The huge, dense populations of New York and other Northern big cities allowed newspapers to drop individual copy prices, increase advertising, and gain huge circulation numbers. This increased sales volume provided huge profits.

Comparing newspapering in vastly different markets misses the point. The Register operated in a market where resources such as labor, material, money, and news were in short supply, and expensive to get. Great distances separated potential buyers and sellers. In New York, resources, if not abundant, were at least readily available. About 515,394 people lived in New York City alone in 1850, while the entire state of Alabama contained only 771,623 people.

Journalism historians ought to be asking whether the newspapers in each market provided what their readers wanted, not whether the Register practiced newspapering like the Times, Tribune, Herald, or whatever of New York. For many historians the answer is “no” because the Register wasn’t...well...the Times, Tribune, or Herald.

Publishers of the Register and of other newspapers who sought business catered to what they saw as the special interests of their readers. Before the Civil War,
the planters, merchants, lawyers, doctors, and others who could afford the Register wanted a paper that provided opinions on the great political issues of the day. Most of all they wanted the latest commercial information and news of wars, disasters, markets, and other information that might affect their businesses and investments. “In a growing commercial place,” the Register said in 1835, “the first demand from a newspaper, is for Commercial Intelligence. To this, our attention will be chiefly directed.”

The Register’s publishers not only were sensitive to the particular news biases of the community, they shared them. This was especially true on the issue of slavery. The Register and every other paper in the South was expected to support slavery and oppose abolitionists.

The publishers didn’t back slavery because they were party papers and were ordered to do so. Partisan or independent, the publishers genuinely believed the South’s peculiar institution essential to the region. Any editor who people even suspected of supporting abolition was driven out of the South, or at least out of business.

After secession, everyone’s attention turned to news of the war and the fate the Confederacy. The newly combined Advertiser and Register organized one of the Confederacy’s best systems of special correspondence by telegraph and mail, as well as a special express for news outside the Confederacy. The Register sent correspondents to every major field of battle. The paper helped form and direct the Press Association of the Confederacy.

The Register ramped up its reporting system so fast
that it suggests that the paper may have had an organization in place prior to secession. Finding and directing correspondents to the right fields of battle, mastering the logistics of getting stories back to the *Register*, and arranging for supplies and salaries took time. It’s possible that correspondents simply telegraphed their desire to report for the *Register* and were hired.

Regardless of how the *Register* had put together its system of reporters, the organization fell apart with the end of the war. Many of the South’s newspapers also didn’t survive the war and the *Register* very nearly was among them. It took Forsyth about five months to regain control of the *Register*’s offices from the Yankee squatter who occupied them.

After a brief period of uncertainty and a nod to the results of the war, Forsyth employed the *Register* as a pulpit to oppose Republicans and their plans for Reconstruction. He sought to reset economic and social issues, minus slavery, to where they had been before the war. Most of all, Forsyth and Democrats sought to have whites control local politics.

The poor state of the *Register*’s finances threatened Forsyth’s goals. When William d’Alton Mann decided to buy the newspaper, he offered Forsyth a sweetheart deal. Forsyth received a generous salary to stay on as editor and the ability to continue his political crusade against Reconstruction and Republicans. In return, Mann gained support for his personal and political ambitions from the newspaperman still considered the South’s premier editor. Mann used his oversized personality to promote the *Register* and Mobile, but most of all his own interests.
After Mann’s promotional schemes collapsed, he left the Register in perhaps worse financial shape than he found it. Forsyth and John L. Rapier managed to rescue the newspaper from being sold for its debts. But its finances remained on shaky ground until well after Forsyth’s death in 1877.

Part of the Register’s financial problems stemmed from larger shifts taking place in the U.S. economy. While Southerners were fighting to create a separate nation during the Civil War and struggled against Reconstruction, big changes had been taking place outside of the South. Farms in the Midwest and West climbed from 2 million in 1860 to 2.6 million by 1870, and jumped to 4 million before the end of the ‘70s.

Northern and Midwestern populations also had grown rapidly. A large part of the nation’s economic progress in the immediate years after the war was based on completing the transcontinental railroads to connect the industrial northeast with the farm and grazing area of the Midwest and plains states.

These new economic and transportation networks rearranged the patterns of American commerce. Old South economic centers of Mobile, Charleston, and even New Orleans were left behind. All three cities experienced a decline in their ports, and their wealth declined relative to their economic ranks before the war.

In contrast to the South’s regional journalism, wealthier, big city Northern newspapers quickly adopted modern methods and equipment after the war, because they could afford to do so. Their compact markets allowed them to create economies of scale to sell large amounts of advertising, garner huge audiences, and make a lot of money. This financial security allowed
for greater independence and promoted a national outlook on events.

The war, Reconstruction, and shifts in commercial patterns delayed many Southern cities’ ability to take part in the changes sweeping the rest of the country. The Register and Mobile looked provincial and behind the times.

After Forsyth’s death in 1877, Rapier slowly put the Register on a sound business footing. This allowed Rapier to employ modern technological advances and journalistic methods, much as happened with Northern big city newspapers. Rapier added telephones, electric lights, mechanical typesetters, and large, fast presses that could print hundreds of newspapers a minute. Rapier also expanded the news in the Register by increasing the number of columns, articles, and syndicated features. He hired professional business and news managers who improved operations and news gathering.

In his time at the helm of the newspaper, Rapier had performed an outstanding rescue of the Register’s finances and modernized its plant and equipment. That Rapier enabled the Register to live to celebrate its first 100 years illustrates the importance of someone with sound business sense leading the paper. He had steered the Register into a new age of modern management.

But Rapier couldn’t imbue his heirs with the same talents or passion for the newspaper business. Five years after Rapier’s death, his heirs and major investor James K. Glennon decided to sell the Register. The start on the next 100 years in the Register’s story would begin under the direction of the energetic and ambitious Frederick I. Thompson.
Acknowledgments

During the decades of researching, writing, revising, and updating this text, I have benefited from the generosity of numerous librarians, archivists, scholars, former newspapermen and newspaperwomen, and many others. Most have since retired and too many of them, who were my friends, too, have passed on to a greater reward. I owe them all a great debt of gratitude.
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Also by Ralph E. Poore

*Power Shifts: The last 100 years of The Mobile Press Register*

*[Newspapering*], my blog with more stories about the Mobile Register and the Mobile Press.

*Poore Boys in Gray*
Or the story of three brothers from the Mississippi Piney Woods who fought in the Civil War’s most important battles while at home their family struggled to survive against Union raiders, Confederate tax agents and renegades.

*Hard Times, Brave Men*
*The Story of Ralph and Dick Poore*
Two Brothers from the Mississippi Piney Woods  
Who Triumphed Over the Great Depression  
And Helped Win World War II