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Secession story set in stone

Georgia Historical Society to unveil marker to commemorate vote to pull out of union

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By [Chuck Mobley](#)

The Georgia Historical Society has put the story of the Georgia Secession Convention in stone, 115 words on a historical marker that will be dedicated next week in Milledgeville as part of a statewide commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

"Secession began in response to Abraham Lincoln's election as president

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A photo circa 1903 shows the dedication of the monument to Confederate officer Francis S. Bartow in Chippewa Square. The monument was later relocated to the foot of the Confederate Memorial monument in Forsyth Park. (John Carrington/Savannah Morning News)

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the previous November and the belief that his Republican party was 'anti-slavery in its mission and its purpose,' according to the Georgia's secession ordinance," reads a portion of the text on the marker.

The crisp account of the convention cuts through the myths that have developed since the end of the war, and takes an honest look at why Georgia pulled out of the United States, said W. Todd Groce, president and CEO of the GHS.

The evidence is overwhelming that the defense of slavery led to Georgia's secession, Groce said. The marker's text was based on what was said at the convention, and what was in the Declaration of Causes, a subsequent document in which the delegates explained their actions.

Secessionists were angry about the failure of the federal government to enforce laws connected to slavery, such as the Fugitive Slave Law, a provision of the Compromise of 1850 that required citizens to assist in the apprehension of runaway slaves, Groce said.

"They wanted to see the full power of the federal government behind slavery," said Groce, a native of Virginia who had ancestors on both sides during the Civil War.

The term "state's rights" does not appear in Georgia's Declaration of Causes," he added.

One of three Chatham County signers of the Secession Ordinance, attorney Francis Bartow was a prominent proponent for disunion. A state legislator and an officer in the Oglethorpe Light Infantry, one of the city's militia units, Bartow was a delegate to the three-day secession convention in January of 1861.

He poured out his feelings about the issue, in the flowery style of that era, in a letter to his father that's part of the collections of the GHS: "... I see no safety, no honor, no fidelity in any other step than the quick advance through fog, through doubt, through darkness, into the glorious field of action."

Some seven months later, Bartow, by then a Confederate colonel, was killed at the Battle of First Manassas in Virginia.

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Countdown to secession

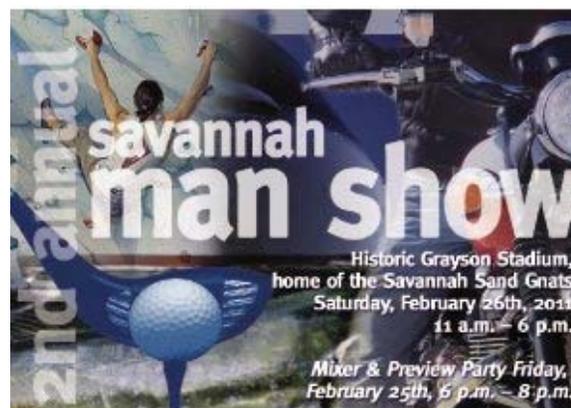
For 40 years, starting with the Missouri Compromise, Americans argued with ever-increasing vehemence over slavery.

To many Southerners, it was a matter of property rights. They owned the slaves, the argument went, and as such should be allowed to take their property into any state and territory.

To many Northerners, and particularly the abolitionists, there could be no justification to holding other human beings in permanent subjugation.

The arguments, and the risks for the nation, were intensified by the ever-ominous series of events and disputes that deepened the divide.

- 1820: The Missouri Compromise — Congress voted on strictly sectional, not party, lines to admit the 24th state and draw a line dividing the country for slavery purposes.
- 1822: Charleston foiled a plot by Denmark Vesey, a free black man, to lead a revolt. Vesey and 35 of his followers were hung.
- 1831: The Nat Turner revolt in Virginia — Turner, a slave and preacher, ignited a killing spree that took the lives of some 60 to 70 whites, including men, women and children. He and 20 of his followers were hung, and the South quickly tightened laws governing slavery and manumission. Also that year, William Lloyd Garrison began publication of "The Liberator," an abolitionist newspaper that called for immediate emancipation of the slaves.
- 1828-33: John C. Calhoun led the nullification cause in South Carolina, maintaining the state could pick and choose which federal laws it wanted to obey. Calhoun backed down when confronted by President Andrew Jackson, but he and other state leaders weren't shy about their intentions to challenge national authority again.
- 1846-48: The Mexican War caused further divisions. Many northern politicians saw the conflict as a power grab, an attempt to extend what they derisively called the "slaveocracy." The Wilmot Proviso, an unsuccessful attempt by northern congressmen to ban slavery from any territory won from Mexico, sent the debate to new heights.
- The Compromise of 1850: Championed by Henry Clay, this was a congressional attempt to settle the sectional differences. It allowed California to enter the union as a free state, and it also allowed the South to pursue and capture fugitive slaves that had fled to the North.
- 1852: "Uncle Tom's Cabin," the novel about slavery by Harriet Beecher Stowe, was published. It was praised in the North, damned in the South, and read everywhere. It became, after the Bible, the most widely sold book in the nation.



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- 1854-56: Popular sovereignty became an explosive issue as Kansas Territory settlers debated whether they should enter the union as a slave or free state. The issue turned violent, and “Bloody Kansas” became a rallying point for both sides.
- 1857: The U.S. Supreme Court issued its decision in the Dred Scott case, ruling that no black person — slave or free — had a legal claim to United States citizenship. Protests rang throughout the North, and bitter denunciations were directed at Chief Justice Roger Taney. As for Scott, he was sold shortly after the ruling, and his new owner granted him his freedom some two months later.
- 1858-60: Savannah was involved in two high-profile incidents involving slavery. In the first, Charles Lamar bought the “Wanderer,” a famed racing yacht, converted it to a slave ship, sailed to Africa, loaded it with Africans, and then landed some 400 of them at Jekyll Island. A sensational trial on federal charges concerning the Wanderer played out over several months at the U.S. Customs House on Bay Street in Savannah. The judge in the case was U.S. Supreme Court Justice James Moore Wayne, a Savannah native, who was responsible for that federal judicial district.

The second incident, a notorious slave auction on the city's westside in 1859, also attracted national attention. Pierce Butler, who owned cotton and rice plantations on the Georgia coast, brought some 440 slaves to Savannah, placed them in the stables of the Ten Broeck Race Course, and then sold them, a two-day process that earned him some \$300,000. The incident, in African-American history, is called “the weeping time.”

- 1859: John Brown sent a seismic charge through the nation when he led an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Va. He was captured, and soon tried and executed. His death became a rallying cry for many Northerners.
- November of 1860: The election of President Abraham Lincoln, who was widely derided in the South as a “Black Republican,” pushed several Southern states to the brink of secession. South Carolina, on Dec. 20, 1860, did leave the Union, and Georgia set up a secession convention for January of 1861 to chart its course.
- Jan. 3, 1861: Troops from Savannah militia units, acting under orders from Georgia Gov. Joseph E. Brown, seized control of Fort Pulaski.
- Jan. 16-19, 1861: The Georgia Secession Convention met in Milledgeville, and eventually voted 208-89 to pull out of the Union.

Sources: Savannah Morning News files, New Georgia Encyclopedia, Georgia Historical Society.

A Family Divided

As 1860 began, James Moore Wayne was one of Savannah's most outstanding citizens by

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any measure.

He'd served as a U.S. Supreme Court associate justice for some 25 years, and before that had held several elective offices in the city, including that of mayor. He'd ridden as a Georgia Hussar during the War of 1812, and had put in several years as judge of the superior court of Savannah.

But, though a slave owner himself, Wayne would not follow his native city or state out of the Union. He was unyielding in his decision to stay in Washington, D.C., and remain a justice.

It's a national duty, he wrote, "to maintain, defend, and preserve the Union, and to transmit it entire to future generations!"

That sentiment was not shared by his son, Henry Constantine Wayne. A West Point graduate, and a regular Army officer, the younger Wayne resigned his commission and took up arms against the United States. He eventually reached the rank of major general.

Today, James Moore Wayne's grand house at Liberty and Bull streets, which was completed in 1821, is a major tourist attraction, but not because of him. He sold it to the Gordon family in 1831, and Juliette Gordon Low — the founder of the Girl Scouts — was born there in 1860.

Sources: Savannah Morning News files, Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, "James Moore Wayne: Southern Unionist," by Alexander A. Lawrence.

Historical marker text

The Georgia Historical Society, in partnership with the Georgia Battlefields Association and the Georgia Department of Economic Development, will mark the 150th anniversary of the state's Secession Convention at 10 a.m. Wednesday with the dedication of a historical marker in Milledgeville, at the corner of Jefferson and Greene streets (the north gate of Georgia Military College).

The marker reads

Georgia Secession Convention

On January 16, 1861, the Georgia Secession Convention met here to consider seceding from the United States. Secession began in response to Abraham Lincoln's election as president the previous November and the belief that his Republican party was "anti-slavery in its mission and its purpose," according to Georgia's secession ordinance. Secession was not a foregone conclusion; initially a slim majority of delegates were opposed to it. After three days of strident rhetoric on both sides of the question, the final vote on January 19 was decidedly pro-secession, 208-89. Delegate Alexander Stephens warned that secession meant war and "who but this Convention will be held responsible for it?" Secession was never put to a popular vote.

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