

AUGUSTA COUNTY: JOHN H. COCHRAN TO HIS MOTHER, OCTOBER 8, 1860

[Bibliographic Information](#)

[Modern-Spelling Version](#)

SUMMARY:

Cochran outlines a political argument supporting southern secession.

Richmond Oct 8th 1860

Dear Mother

Your letter was received this evening and I take this opportunity of answering it.

I am glad to hear that Franks opinions upon political principles are undergoing a change and hope that by the time he has a vote that like his brother he will be an orthodox democrat.

As to the party to which I belong being disunionists it is a charge that cannot be substantiated and I defy anyone to prove by our platform of principles or by the record of either of our candidates that we are.

There are men in the party (of which I am one) who seeing that without a vigorous effort we will be wrecked upon that shoal to which we have been slowly but surely [*been*] drifting for years -- I mean slavish submission to a mere numerical majority. We hold to the principle among others that this government is not solely the government of a majority but that the minority have rights that must be respected. To preserve these rights the constitution was framed which puts such checks and restraints upon the dominant power as the framers in their far seeing wisdom thought necessary.

But it is said that at this late day we have suddenly waked up to the idea that we were not getting our rights in the Union and that the leaders of the party were disposed to ruin the country for the sake of reopening the slave trade. The last of these charges is a ridiculous absurdity and could only been hatched in the brain of some unscrupulous opponent of the true States Rights Democracy.

Now as to the other question we have been battling against abolitionism is some form or other for many years. The abolition of slavery has been agitated in congress ever since 1790 first came petitions in that year for the abolition of the slave trade. Then petitions in 1805 for the exclusion of slave property from the territories. Then in 1817 petitions against the slave trade between the middle and southern states. Then in 1831 petitions for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. In 1836 Calhoun declared that the agitation of this question "would sunder the Union." "It was agitation here that they feared" James Buchannan showed that the moment it was abolished in the District that this Union would be dissolved. In 37 the contest grew hot in the house of representatives and there [*for the first time*] John Bell proved himself a disunionist by helping to keep open an agitation which Statesmen like Calhoun had declared would break up the Union.

From that time forth he has acted with the abolition party sometimes openly at other times he failed to vote on either side -- at others he deemed it prudent to represent his constituents.

Now on the other hand the party to which I am attached have always been consistently opposed to all such measures. We (speaking of the Democracy) have opposed the agitation of this subject in the halls of Congress. We have denied the right to petition upon the subject because slaves were property under the Constitution. (Though Botts in his late speech here took the ground that they were not) and could not be confiscated.

We have procured a decision of the Supreme Court in our favour (Dred Scott case). Speaking of the power of Congress in the territories [Judge] Chief Justice Taney uses these very words. "The only power conferred is the power coupled with the duty [to protect] of guarding and protecting the owner in his rights." Out of the nine judges of the court seven concurred in this decision . And yet when we incorporate this in our creed and demand that Congress shall exercise this protecting power we are branded as traitors by the very party who were loudest in their professions of loyalty to the South a few short months ago. The party which declares that they go for the enforcement of the laws. Yet when we ask to have this power which the highest tribunal in the country has declared is legal enforced cries out that we want to break up the Union -- and that we are a set of traitors who ought all of us to be hung.

We have been driven to the wall at last. As a last resort we stand upon the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions of 98 and 99. By them we have determined to stand or fall. Holding up the Constitution we have asked to have the rights it secures us given to us in the Union. If we have them we are the last people who would wish to dissolve the Union . On the other hand we have determined that if it is necessary that we should go out of the Union for the purpose of maintaining these rights that we will do it. It is an alternative which we do not seek but as a free people we will not submit to having our rights taken from us by that greatest of all tyrants a numerical majority. We will have no more men like Bell to compromise our rights away -- compromise but invites aggression. For one I am like Harry Hotspur "upon a matter of right I will cavil to the ninth part of a hair." Upon the election of Lincoln which the opposition I fear are making but too sure -- some if not all of the Cotton states will leave the Union if they are allowed to leave peacefully the other slave states will not be slow in following where interest points. If the Federal power attempts to coerce them into the Union again the border states will not be slow to make common cause with their more southern sisters. So that in any event we will have a United South.

I am glad to hear that all are well I feared that either you or the baby was sick from not hearing from you sooner. There is no news here except in political circles and even there the argument seems to move very much in a circle. we start with the resolutions of 98 & 99 affirming the right of a state to leave the Union and we end with them.

Baylor's proposition to fuse with the Douglass faction fell like a bomb among us and I confess I among others was afraid a fusion upon that basis would be acceded to. Thank Heaven that danger is past and that our [illeg.] electoral ticket remains untarnished with the name of a single man who holds to the heresies or follows the fortunes of that desperate political gambler Stephen Arnold Douglass.

tell Frank that I will send him some papers -- But that if he wants to understand the issues in the present canvass he will have to read the long editorials and [illeg.] contributions not paragraphs about murders.

I suppose you are about as tired as I am by this time so I will close. Hoping that all are well

I remain your affectionate son.

J.H. Cochran

P.S. Give my respects to all. I have not seen young Alexander and would not be likely to grow very intimate with him if I had. Setting aside my disinclination to dissipate my business is such that I could not get time for it. Excuse mistakes and blots as there is a political discussion going on in this room now and I have been party in it ever since before I commenced to write.

J.H.C.

Oct. 9 I open this letter to ask you to preserve these two papers which I send to Frank. I value them on account of Mr. Seddon's able letter . It is well worth reading

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