The Significance of the Historic Secession Oak in Downtown Bluffton

By: Megan Reilly

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The Secession Oak played a key role in the formation of the Bluffton Movement in the 1840s. The oak, which is located in Old Town Bluffton on what was John Verdier’s plantation, served as a meeting place for local activists. It was under this tree where Robert Rhett gave his speech demanding that action be taken against the tariff and where many were inspired to contribute to what would become the Confederate cause. It was here that the seed for secession was planted (Rowland, 1996). Throughout the war, the Secession Oak was an emblem for the soldiers and leaders of the Lowcountry.

“The Bluffton Movement” began as a political stance against the Federal Government, opposing the Tariff Bill of 1842. This bill significantly raised the average tariff rates and impacted the trading economy along the coast. Lowcountry plantation owners became agitated with tariff laws and disputes over states’ rights. On July 31st, 1844, a group of local planters, including Squire William Pope, George Edward, James Kirk, and Heyward Hamilton, organized a dinner party to welcome home their representative in Congress and to discuss their growing conflicts with the Federal Government. Planters, led by Edmund Rhett, also came from Beaufort (Rowland, 1996). The event had been planned by a committee that included Pope and Kirk, along with Benjamin Scott, George Stoney, William Wigg, Thomas Drayton, and Burrell Wiggins (Cantrell, 1988).

Despite the previous days’ rain, about 500 people attended, including US Congressman Robert Rhett. That evening, Rhett spoke fervently about the need to protect the state’s “sovereignty” and introduced some of his more radical ideas. The implication of his speech was, “either nullification...or secession” (Bluffton Historical Preservation Society, 1983, p. 9). No imported food was served at the dinner in an effort to protest the high tariffs. During the meeting, men wore badges of palmetto leaves to signify their resistance (Davis, 2001). That
night, Rhett toasted the idea of an 1845 state convention by drawing a parallel to the American Revolution saying “May it be as useful as the Convention of 1776” (Davis, 2001, pg 200).

Eventually the ideas of Rhett and other “fire-eaters” began to take off. This group of men, called the Bluffton Boys, were known for their more extreme views and their willingness to secede or even go to war. When this group was founded, they received much criticism. However, as the situation in Washington deteriorated and the debate over the annexation of Texas as a slave state continued, the ideas of the Bluffton Boys gained acceptance. The death of John C. Calhoun in 1850 also allowed the ideas of the Bluffton Boys to spread. Without the opposition of Calhoun’s more conservative views, the radical views of Rhett and other fire-eaters thrived and eventually influenced the secession of South Carolina. (Fulgham, 2012)

Those present at the Secession Oak dinner were joined by other supporters of the Bluffton Movement, including John McQueen, William Colcock, Whitemarsh Seabrook, and James Hammond (Fulgham, 2012). The Bluffton Boys played significant roles in South Carolina’s politics and the road to secession, serving as governors and congressmen. Edmund Rhett, Robert’s brother, served as mayor of Beaufort and, along with Colcock, was a director of the Charleston and Savannah Railroad. This railroad was essential to Confederate troops as it provided transportation of supplies and reinforcement troops (Fulgham, 2012). Many of the men at the Secession Oak meeting eventually lost their homes in the burning of Bluffton, including Pope, Drayton, and Wiggins (Bluffton Historic Preservation Society, 1983, map).

Thomas Drayton was an influential Bluffton Boy who went on to play an active role in the war. Drayton owned a plantation on Hilton Head and a summer home in Bluffton and served as president of the Charleston and Savannah Railroad during its construction. During the war, Drayton became a Brigadier General and was a commander during the Battle of Port Royal. Drayton’s brother Percival also had a role in the war, but as a Union ship Commander. Percival was in charge of the USS Pocahontas and fired on Thomas’s troops stationed at Fort Walker on Hilton Head (Wise, 2015).
Robert Rhett was an essential figure in the Bluffton Movement and influenced the war in South Carolina. He became a politician and was elected attorney general for South Carolina. He was later elected to the 25th Congress in 1836 by a margin of 133 votes and went on to serve six terms. Fellow Bluffton Boy Governor Seabrook backed him in his successful bid as US Senator in 1850 after the death of his nemesis, John C. Calhoun (Davis, 2001). While in Washington, Rhett advocated for states’ rights and strongly opposed the tariffs, which harmed the business of many of his Lowcountry constituents. He resigned from his duties in Congress in 1852 and returned to the Lowcountry. Rhett was a delegate for the South Carolina Secession Convention in 1860, as well as a delegate to the Confederate Provisional Congress. The fire-eater said South Carolina could be a “light upon a hill” and a beacon for lovers of the constitution and the rights of the people (Davis, 2001, pg 200). Rhett was also influential through his newspaper *The Charleston Mercury*, of which his son Robert Rhett, Jr. was the editor.

While many would assume the Civil War was based on the desire to continue slavery, this is not necessarily the case. To many in the Lowcountry, the war represented a movement against oppressive laws and tariffs and a fight to maintain states’ rights. Although Rhett’s ideas were seen as premature, they inspired many young fire-eaters and were instrumental in South Carolina’s path to secession. As Janice Hunter Cantrell noted, “History tends to show that ‘The Bluffton Movement’ did not subside but was a strong catalyst among the forces which brought about the secession of South Carolina on December 20, 1860” (Cantrell, 1988, pg 12). The Secession Oak witnessed the birth of the Bluffton Movement and the rise of influential leaders of South Carolina.
Bibliography


Fulgham, Jeff. The Bluffton Expedition: The Burning of Bluffton, South Carolina, During the Civil War. 2012.
