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The Poughkeepsie Eagle

The Civil War affected every citizen of the United States as the conflict pitted brother versus brother, family versus family and the nation against itself. At the heart of the Civil War was the issue of slavery which had been cause for debate for decades leading up to the War. The people of the Hudson River Valley, like those across the continent were affected by the war and just as involved. The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly and, subsequently, Poughkeepsie Daily Eagle expressed the views of the citizens of the river valley and their feelings of the South, slavery, and the war itself. These articles give insight into what people far from the front but close to the action felt and believed; and it will be seen that they were fervently against slavery and willing to do what was necessary to fight the war for the integrity and the upholding one of the nation's most basic principles: freedom.

In the years leading up to the Civil War there was a sense of strife within the nation. Many of the views of the time were conflicted as the North pitted itself against the South on issues such as the great question of slavery and the slave trade. As the Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly noted, the Supreme Court of the United States during this time sought to bring acceptance of slavery through the Lecompton Constitution and Kansas Question; though, in retort of this action Senator William Seward of New York, originally from Florida, New York, exclaimed, "The people of the United States never can, and they never will accept principles so unconstitutional, and so abhorrent."¹ Senator Seward was a fervent anti-slavery voice in the Senate and believed that the nation was tumbling to war; in March of 1858, the Poughkeepsie

¹ William Seward, "Senator Seward on Kansas and Slavery," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly* (March 6, 1858): 2.

Eagle Weekly published a speech that the Senator had made in relation to the Lecompton Constitution, which essentially brought Kansas into the Union as a slaveholding state. The Senator of New York expressed his thoughts on what had happened, stating:

Let us only become all slaveholding states on this side of those barriers, while only free states are organized and perpetuated on the other side, and then indeed there will come a division of the great American family into two nations equally ambitious for complete control over the continent, and a conflict between them, over which the world will mourn,²

Seward perceived the threat slavery posed and believed that conflict would be a terrible world spectacle. This being a few years before the first shots of the war on the *Star of the West* and the firing of Fort Sumter occurred. Seward was interested in the Republican nomination for the Presidency in the upcoming 1860 election, though, in hindsight many believe that had he actually won that nomination and subsequently the Presidency, military action would have happened much earlier. Many of Seward's views were expressed throughout the Republican Party in New York.

In the section of The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly titled Republican Platform, J.C. Fremont, a Radical Republican candidate voiced clearly his and, essentially, the views of the party on the issue of slavery when he stated, "I am opposed to Slavery.... While I feel inflexible in the belief that it ought not to be interfered with...I am as inflexibly opposed to its extension in this Continent beyond Its present limits."³ Many in the Republican Party were aggressively pushing for emancipation and the end to the illegal slave trade; though the majority of the party put these issues on the side. Due to this, however, there were harsh laws that were not carried out on those who were caught illegally shipping, selling and trading slaves. These issues were discussed in articles of The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly which stated, "While this slave trade is

² *Ibid.*

³ J.C. Fremont, "Republican platform," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly* (March 6, 1858): 2.

made piracy under the laws of congress...the government officials from the President down, and the United States Courts, - so efficient to punish all who aid to rescue fugitive slaves in the north, - remain entirely passive and take not the first step to bring the guilty to punishment.”⁴ At this point in the history of the United States the illegal slave trade was at its height and Southern buyers and sellers were not afraid to openly do business as they had for years prior to the outlawing of the slave trade.

At the heart of this issue was the absorption of new states into the Union, like Kansas, for instance, which Seward so actively pressured to be admitted as a non-slave state. The feelings of the North, once again as seen in *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly*, “The results at which we are shocked are regarded without objection, and even with approval; and this institution, so abhorrent to the view of common humanity, is defended, cherished, and sought to be extended.”⁵ The article further discussed the manner by which slaves were being sold and how the “Peculiar Institution” operated and sought to expand its current boundaries to more states being admitted to the U.S. However, as elections came near and Republicans won majorities in Congress, Southern pressure increased. Finally with the election of Abraham Lincoln, a Republican candidate, in the 1860 election, Southern States began to see the implications concerning slavery and their way of life. Southern Congressman began discussing plans to secede which the paper characterized as, “Southern bluster within the last few days has given rise to a deal of...disruption of the United States by a secession of a portion of the Southern members,” on 24 November, 1860; mere weeks following the election of Lincoln and Vice President Hannibal Hamlin.⁶ After secession had been deemed illegal by President James Buchanan and President Elect Lincoln, South

⁴ “African Slave Trade,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly* (July 9, 1859): 2.

⁵ “The Peculiar Institution,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly* (March 31, 1860): 2.

⁶ “The Right of Secession,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly* (November 24, 1860): 2.

Carolina officially seceded from the United States of America and began the national crisis headlining papers across the country.

Shortly following the secession of South Carolina, several Southern States followed and began the process of forming their own government; in addition to this, demands were made on 20 December, 1860, for the Union to begin abandoning the forts and batteries lining the bay to Charleston, as expressed in *The Eagle*, “The Rebels insist on taking the forts. If they find Fort Moultrie too difficult, they will take Fort Sumter...and then turn the guns of the former on Fort Moultrie.”⁷ The demands by the South were cause for great discussion in Washington in the coming days though the commander of Fort Moultrie acted on his own when Major Robert Anderson, “evacuated Fort Moultrie in order to allay the discussion about that post, and at the same time strengthen his own position [at Fort Sumter].”⁸ Anderson also burned Fort Moultrie so that it was unusable to the Southern Troops moving to occupy it.⁹ The response to these developments in several Northern States including New York prompted mustering.

John B. Haskin, a Representative of New York addressed the people of the Empire State in a letter published in several newspapers, including *The Eagle*. In his letter to the people on 29 December, the day following the evacuation of Fort Moultrie, Haskin declared:

Already madmen in the South are arming, and preparing to resist Federal Authority. In view of this state of affairs, permit me to suggest that the action of the State Legislature should be called by you in your annual message to the formation of volunteer military companies to sustain, if need be, the Union – to protect the Federal property, and aid in enforcing Federal Laws.¹⁰

Also in his letter to the people, Haskin mentioned how President Buchanan was acting cowardly toward the Southern threat by saying, “There can no longer be any doubt that the President and

⁷ “Reaction in Charleston,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily* (December 20, 1860): 2.

⁸ “Fort Moultrie Evacuated and Destroyed,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily* (December 28, 1860): 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John B. Haskin, “Volunteer Military Companies,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily* (December 29, 1860): 2.

his Cabinet are joint conspirators...who favor a Southern Confederacy,” and that it was the duty of New York to uphold the laws and protection of the country if the President wouldn't.¹¹ In addition to this feeling which could be expressed throughout New York, The Eagle published a short article in the newspaper on the same day simply stating, “I am sorry to have to announce that the President's courage seems to be failing him, and he is said to be in favor of withdrawing the U.S. Troops from Fort Sumter.”¹² As Buchanan's term drew to an end many in the nation felt as if he was letting the South slip away from the United States and was not acting. Coupled with the secessions was the immediate besieging of Fort Sumter where Major Anderson had withdrawn to, as mentioned in The Eagle on 4 January, 1861; following his retreat from Fort Moultrie, the Southern Troops moved in and repaired the Fort, and then turned the guns from it and the surrounding batteries onto Fort Sumter.¹³

As the tensions between North and South increased, President Elect Lincoln made his way by train to Washington D.C. for his inauguration, passing through the Hudson River Valley. In a few days time after receiving, “...an invitation to visit the Capitol of the Great Empire State of this nation,” Lincoln would leave Albany and the issues in the South would be for him to address.¹⁴ Since the besieging of Fort Sumter, attempts to resupply the fort were taken, one of the famous instances being the *Star of the West*, a civilian ship, sent to resupply the garrison but was fired upon by the Southern forces controlling the outlying forts and batteries. Once Lincoln formally took office, however, he ordered the resupplying of Fort Sumter to which the South responded with an ultimatum to evacuate the fort, not wanting a fort of a foreign power being in their territory. On 12 April, 1861, Southern forces fired on Fort Sumter from all sides using the

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “The President Yielding,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily* (December 29, 1860): 2.

¹³ “Highly Important from Washington,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily* (January 4, 1861): 2.

¹⁴ “President Lincoln's Movements,” *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily* (February 19, 1861): 2.

guns formally in the control of the Union. The Civil War had officially begun; on 13 April The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily exclaimed that, "The expedition for the relief of Fort Sumter, it is said has been undertaken against the advice of Gen. Scott, who has urged the evacuated of both Forts Sumter and Pickens."¹⁵ Soon after, Union Troops and Southern forces began the United States' bloodiest conflict.

The articles that The Poughkeepsie Eagle Weekly and Daily printed demonstrate the tensions and controversy that enveloped the United States in the years leading up the Civil War. Political movements coupled with actions aimed at the destruction (and maintaining of slavery in the case of the South) led to the national debate on the question of slavery. The articles printed show the views of the state of New York through the eyes of her natives, such as Senator Seward and John B. Haskin; and the views of the Hudson River Valley can be expressed through the writings of the articles of the author by using words such as "we" and "us". It is clear that the Hudson River Valley was involved in the prewar controversy and it will be shown how the this area, so important to the nation's image, was involved in the Civil War, a pivotal moment in American history.

¹⁵ "The War Begun," *The Poughkeepsie Eagle Daily* (April 13, 1861): 2.

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