

Preface
By Sara Kumar

The election on Tuesday, November 6, 1860 was won by Republican presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln and his vice-presidential running mate, also a Republican, named Hannibal Hamlin with just less than 40% of the popular vote. Their victory in the Electoral College was secure, as the Democratic candidate Stephen Douglas was voted for mainly in the Northern states, where the Republican ticket carried the Electoral College. Additionally, Stephen Douglas was not supported well in the Southern states, and he was not nominated at the Democratic convention held in Charleston, South Carolina in April of 1860, when fifty Southern Democrats walked out of the convention. This action set the stage for South Carolina to become the first state to secede from the Union on December 20, 1860. On voting day, prior to the secession of South Carolina, Abraham Lincoln secured 1,867,198 popular votes, and Stephen Douglas secured 1,379,434 popular votes. Also on the ballot were John Breckinridge, a Southern Democrat, and John Bell, a Constitutional Union candidate. Abraham Lincoln viewed the election as a success and as a mandate to step into the national arena at a moment of great crisis.¹

Senator Andrew Johnson had a real decision to make, and he began a speech in the Senate on the evening of Tuesday, December 18, 1860, that lasted into the next day. Andrew spoke that Tuesday from the Senate floor, “This is the basis upon which a portion of the people of Tennessee,

¹ The American Presidency Project, [1860 | The American Presidency Project](#)

irrespective of party, propose to fight this battle. We believe that our true position is inside of the Union. We deny the doctrine of secession; we deny that a State has the power, of its own volition, to withdraw from the Confederacy. We are not willing to do an unconstitutional act, to induce or to coerce others to comply with the Constitution of the United States. We prefer complying with the Constitution and fighting our battle, and making our demand inside of the Union.” Senator Andrew Johnson would become the only Southern senator to remain true to the Union cause, and President Abraham Lincoln would name him Military Governor of Tennessee on March 3, 1862. The next inauguration for president and vice-president was set for March 4 of 1865.²

The Senator from Tennessee continued his speech much later on, “There are many ideas afloat about this threatened dissolution, and it is time to speak out. The question arises in reference to the protection and preservation of the institution of slavery, whether dissolution is a remedy or will give to it protection. I avow here, today, that if I were an Abolitionist, and wanted to accomplish the overthrow and abolition of the institution of slavery in the southern States, the first step that I would take would be to break the bonds of this Union, and dissolve this government. I believe the continuance of slavery depends upon the preservation of this Union, and a compliance with all the guarantees of the Constitution.” Senator Andrew Johnson was not yet

² Johnson, Andrew. “Speech on Secession [December 18-19, 1860].” *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, edited by Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, vol. 4, The University of Tennessee Press, 1976, p. 6 and 32-33, and Johnson, Andrew. “Appointment as Military Governor [War Department / March 3rd. 1862].” *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, edited by Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, vol. 5, The University of Tennessee Press, 1979, p. 177

interested in moving with the arc of justice. Neither was he interested in promoting a constitutional amendment on the eradication of slavery, like some leading members of the Senate and the House of Representatives at the time. Senator Andrew Johnson wanted to stay with the Union for many reasons: to maintain his business and property assets, to do what was needed to remain a senator in the United States Congress, and to place his bets on a bid for the White House in the future. Andrew Johnson also had a prejudice for moneyed Southern plantation owners, like Jefferson Finis Davis, who served in the United States Senate from Mississippi.

Andrew was a tailor by trade, and he had worked in many political jobs in Tennessee, starting as an alderman of a town named Greeneville. The senator from Tennessee supported poor White laborers who needed an extra hand from the government to get started in life with land and funding. Andrew would not support a move for secession for Tennessee, and he believed the United States government would win the Civil War. ³

South Carolina seceded from the United States on the day after Senator Andrew Johnson finished his speech on the Senate floor. Andrew's first born son, Charles Johnson, wrote to his father on New Year's Day of 1861 from Greeneville, Tennessee, saying "What will the future reader of history think when reading of the United States from its formation through its bloody revolution, through its years of prosperity and happiness down to its ignoble fall! And in what light will the south stand upon the pages of that history, they

³ Johnson, Andrew. "Speech on Secession [December 18-19, 1860]." *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, edited by Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, vol. 4, The University of Tennessee Press, 1976, p. 32-33

the rebellious party; tearing asunder the bonds of the union, in vindication of the right to enslave a portion of their fellow creatures; the north contending for universal liberty[.]” Charles would not survive through to the end of the Civil War that ensued after Andrew’s speech in December of 1860. The family of Andrew would find themselves moving from state to state in the North and in contested border states, trying to fight a war that would last until April of 1865. Andrew had enslaved nine Black Americans, for some of whom, there is a written record of payment, prior to the beginning of the Civil War and prior to Andrew’s speech on the Senate floor. Their lives too would change forever.

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⁴ Johnson, Andrew. “From Charles Johnson [Greeneville Jany 1st 1861].” *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, edited by Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, vol. 4, The University of Tennessee Press, 1976, p. 110-111