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J. Mills Thornton III

**Politics and Power
in a Slave Society**
Alabama, 1800-1860

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levels. Unprecedented rates of expenditure and the inauguration of novel projects were among the clues which a generation had been taught presaged oppression and eventual despotism. These rather unformed fears were pushed into the danger zone by the inability of the political structure to deal with them. Many younger politicians failed to understand the sources of the anxiety and were unable to provide any outlet for the pressure. Indeed, they suppressed, because it was a threat to their own positions, the one political movement—Winston's—which gave promise of involving the electorate. Conditions, therefore, left many Alabamians ripe for a crusade which would seek to focus the misgivings so widespread in the society upon a specific villain.

Finally, slavery in the territories, the specific issue through which Alabamians were introduced to the fire-eaters' villains, carried within it elements which resonated with many of the aspirations and assumptions of the populace. In 1847 Daniel Pratt, the great industrialist, wrote a long and plaintive letter in which he detailed the difficulties to which the agrarian attitudes of the state subjected him.

I feel myself to be a permanent Citizen of this State. Nearly all I have is here and here I expect it to remain. Consequently I do feel a deep interest in our state affairs. . . . And I further believe that if a majority of both parties were situated as I am (that is, so they could not pull up stakes at any time when they chose and be off) that they would act and manage very different from what they now do. The great evil in our State is that persons janerally do not consider themselves settled [and] consequently do not take nor feel that interest in the future prosperity of our State they otherways would.⁸⁸

Pratt had seen to the heart of the society. Alabamians were as fearful of permanent residence, of putting down roots, as they were of dependence. In fact, permanency seemed a form of dependence. If one became locked into a particular place and station, one lost in some measure the capacity to shape one's own destiny. External forces became powerful in determining the course of one's life, and powerful external forces are by definition limits upon individual autonomy. The entire government of the state was carried on as if it were a temporary expedient, an ad hoc arrangement permitted to interfere briefly and

88. Daniel Pratt to Dixon H. Lewis, September 21, 1847, in Lewis Papers, University of Texas Library.