

Benjamin Hedrick

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT

"Professor Hedrick's Defence," in the *North Carolina Standard* (Raleigh, N.C.), October 4, 1856.

As you read...

Benjamin Hedrick was a professor of chemistry at the University of North Carolina. Born in Davidson County in 1827, he sympathized with the small farmers of the western part of the state, who tended to oppose slavery. He was not a militant abolitionist, but in August 1856, it became known that he supported John Fremont, the Republican candidate for President. The *North Carolina Standard*, a Raleigh newspaper, started a campaign against him. The *Standard* didn't simply call for him to be dismissed from the university but said that "No man who is avowedly for John C. Fremont for President ought to be allowed to breathe the air or tread the soil of North Carolina."

Hedrick's colleagues urged him to stay quiet and let the storm blow over. He ignored them and published a defense of himself and his position. But this, as his colleagues had feared, only gave his enemies proof of their charges. UNC students burned him in effigy, setting fire to a dummy or likeness of him; the trustees fired him, and the faculty issued a statement assuring the people of the state that the faculty had no more "Black Republicans" — as white southerners called whites who sympathized with the hated party. Back in Salisbury, Hedrick was nearly tarred and feathered. He left his native state soon after for New York, and lived the rest of his life in New York and Washington.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why did Hedrick support John C. Fremont for President?
2. Why did Hedrick oppose the extension of slavery?
3. Whom did he quote in his letter to support his argument? Why do you think he chose those people to quote?
4. Was Hedrick in favor of abolishing slavery? Why or why not?
5. Did he think that North Carolina should have more or fewer slaves? Why? How do you think readers would have reacted to this idea, and why?
6. Why do you think the reaction against Hedrick was so strong?

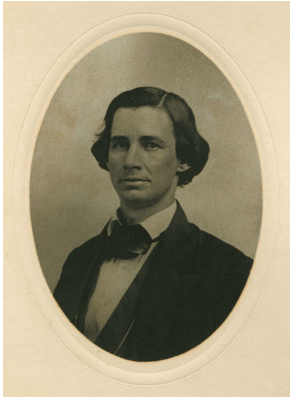


Figure 1. Benjamin Hedrick, in an 1857 photograph.

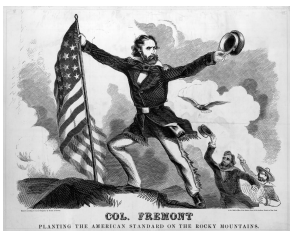


Figure 2. The Republicans nominated John C. Frémont for President in 1856, promoting him as an explorer who had claimed the West for the United States. But Frémont was attacked in the South for his antislavery views.

To make the matter short, I say I am in favor of the election of Fremont¹ to the Presidency; and these are my reasons for my preference:

1st. Because I like the man. He was born and educated at the South. He has lived at the North and the West, and therefore has had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with our whole people, — an advantage not possessed by his competitors². He is known and honored both at home and abroad. He has shown his love of his country by unwavering devotion to its interests....

2d. Because Fremont is on the right side of the great question which now disturbs the public peace. Opposition to slavery extension is neither a Northern or a sectional *ism*³. It originated with the great Southern statesmen of the Revolution. Washington, Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Madison, and Randolph⁴ were all opposed to slavery in the abstract, and were all opposed to admitting it into new territory.... Many of these great men were slaveholders; but they did not let self interest blind them to the evils of the system. Jefferson says that slavery exerts an evil influence both upon the whites and the blacks; but he was opposed to the abolition policy, by which the slaves would be turned loose among the whites. In his autobiography he says: “Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate, than that these people are to be free; nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, can not live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion have drawn indelible lines between them.” Among the evils which he says slavery brings upon the whites, is to make them tyrannical and idle. “With the morals of the people their industry also is destroyed. For in a warm climate no man will labor for himself who can make another labor for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small proportion indeed, are ever seen to labor.” What was true in Jefferson’s time is true now.... No longer ago than 1850, Henry Clay declared in the Senate — “I never can, and never will vote, and no earthly power ever will make me vote to spread slavery over territory where it does not exist.” At the same time that Clay was opposed to slavery, he was, like Fremont, opposed to the least interference with subjects belonging to State policy, either by other States or by the federal government, no one will be more ready than myself, to defend the “good old North,” my native State. But, with Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Henry, Randolph, Clay, and Webster⁵ for political teachers, I *cannot* believe that slavery is preferable to freedom, or that slavery extension is one of the constitutional rights of the South.... [W]hen “Alumnus”⁶ talks of “driving me out” for sentiments once held by these great men, I cannot help thinking that he is becoming rather fanatical....

Of my neighbors, friends, and kindred, nearly one-half have left the State since I was old enough to remember. Many is the time I have stood by the loaded emigrant wagon, and given the parting hand to those whose face I was never to look upon again. They were going to seek homes in the free West, knowing, they did, that free and slave labor could not both exist and prosper in the same community. If any one thinks that I speak without knowledge, let him refer to the last census....

It is not, however, my object to attack the institution of slavery. But even the most zealous defender of the patriarchal institution cannot shut his eyes against a few prominent facts. One is, that in nearly all the slave States there is a deficiency of labor. Since the abolition of the African slave trade there is no source for obtaining a supply, except from the natural increase⁷.... From North Carolina and Virginia nearly the entire increase of the slave population, during the last twenty years, has been sent off to the new

States of the Southwest⁸. In my boyhood I lived on one of the great thoroughfares of travel (near Lock's Bridge on the Yadkin River) and have seen as many as two thousand in a single day, going South, mostly in the hands of speculators. Now the loss of those two thousand did the State a greater injury than would the shipping off of a million of dollars.... I have very little doubt that if the slaves which are now scattered thinly over Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri, were back in Virginia and North Carolina, it would be better for all concerned. These old States could then go on and develop the immense wealth which must remain locked up for many years to come. Whilst the new States, free from a system which degrades white labor, would become a land of Common Schools, thrift and industry, equal if not superior to any in the Union. But letting that as it may, still no one can deny that here in North Carolina we need more men, rather than more land. Then why go to war to make more slave States, when we have too much territory already, for the force we have to work it?...

From my knowledge of the people of North Carolina, I believe that the majority of them who will go to Kansas during the next five years, would prefer that it be a free State. I am sure that if I were to go there I should vote to exclude slavery. In doing so I believe that I should advance the best interest of Kansas, and at the same time benefit North Carolina and Virginia, by preventing the carrying away of slaves who may be more profitably employed at home.

Born in the "good old North State," I cherish a love for her and her people that I bear to no other State or people. It will ever be my sincere wish to advance her interests. I also love the Union of the States, secured as it was by the blood and toil of *my* ancestors; and whatever influence I possess, though small it may be, shall be exerted for its preservation. I do not claim infallibility for my opinions. Wiser and better men have been mistaken. But holding as I do the doctrines once advocated by Washington and Jefferson, I think I should be met by argument and not by denunciation. At any rate, those who prefer to denounce me should at least support their charges by their own name.

B. S. HEDRICK

Chapel Hill, October 1st, 1856.

On the web

More about Benjamin Hedrick

<http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/unc/about/hedrick.html>

Documenting the American South has collected various primary sources relating to Benjamin Hedrick and his dismissal from the University.

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Notes

1. John C. Frémont, born in Georgia, was an explorer who fought in the Mexican-American War and became military governor of California. When California became a state in 1850, Frémont

was elected as one of its first Senators. In 1856, the Republican Party nominated him as its first candidate for President.

2. Frémont's opponents in the 1856 presidential election were James Buchanan, Democrat of Pennsylvania, a former U.S. Representative, Senator, and minister to Great Britain; and former President Millard Fillmore of New York, who ran on the American or "Know-Nothing" Party ticket. Although Frémont was the only major candidate who could claim Southern birth or heritage, he received only 600 votes in the entire South — and those all from the border states of Delaware and Maryland.
3. The term *ism* was used to refer to any or all of the new and potentially dangerous ideas of the antebellum period — political views such as abolitionism and socialism, but also new religious ideas such as Mormonism and spiritualism (the belief that the spirits of the dead can be contacted by the living) and pseudo-scientific ideas such as mesmerism (a type of medicine based on a magnetic fluid supposedly existing in humans and other animals). Southerners, especially, referred to northern "isms" as a threat to various forms of social order.
4. Edmund Randolph (1753–1813), a governor of Virginia and U.S. Secretary of State. At the 1787 Constitutional Convention, Randolph moved (successfully) that the word "slavery" be removed from the Constitution.
5. Daniel Webster, long-serving U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, twice Secretary of State, and a staunch opponent of the expansion of slavery.
6. "Alumnus" was the pseudonym, or pen name, of the author of a letter to the newspaper attacking Hedrick. At this time it was common for people to sign public letters with pseudonyms.
7. The enslaved population of the United States grew because slaves had enough children to more than replace themselves — it increased "naturally" rather than because more slaves were imported from Africa.
8. At this time the "Southwest" meant Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and East Texas. What we now think of as the Southwest was newly added to the United States, and conditions there didn't support the sort of large-scale agriculture that made slavery profitable.

About the author

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David holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America*, published in 2002 by Oxford University Press. With LEARN NC, he has written numerous articles for K–12 teachers on topics such as historical education, visual literacy, writing instruction, and technology integration.

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