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# J. F. H. Claiborne at Laurel Wood Plantation, 1853-1870

*by Herbert H. Lang*

Few of the numerous studies of the varied career of J. F. H. Claiborne give more than scant attention to the life and activities of the Mississippi historian during his years at Laurel Wood plantation; yet, the period of his residence on the Gulf Coast—spanning the last few years of the antebellum era, the Civil War, and Reconstruction—was for Claiborne the most satisfying and significant of his entire life. Indeed, his decision to settle at Laurel Wood in 1853 was a turning point for Claiborne, for it was at this plantation that he rebuilt his personal and political fortunes, and it was there that he produced most of the writings that brought him recognition as Mississippi's foremost historian of the nineteenth century. It was at "Laurel Wood," too, during the war, that Claiborne became deeply embroiled in the intrigue that disrupted the normal course of events on the Gulf Coast for four years and marked the most dangerous and melodramatic period of his life.

Claiborne's early career had been marked by disappointment and failure. He had served in the Mississippi legislature and in Congress, acquiring that profound insight into politics that was to enrich the pages of his books, but he had destroyed his own political future through indefensible machinations in the election dispute of 1837-1838. On another occasion, with unflinching honesty and courage he had exposed the attempt of speculators to defraud the government and the Indians in the notorious Choctaw lands case, securing the gratitude and vindication of Congress, but he had been vilified by some of the most powerful men in his state and

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had been forced to flee Mississippi to a refuge in New Orleans. There, as a novice among men of shrewd business acumen, he had ventured in land, cotton, and slaves,<sup>1</sup> deriving invaluable commercial experience, but he had lost his patrimony through ruinous endorsements<sup>2</sup> and was taken into custody as a common debtor.<sup>3</sup> Later, he had edited with distinction some of the principal Democratic newspapers in Louisiana and Mississippi,<sup>4</sup> earning the gratitude of leaders of his party, but, as a result of his arduous duties, he had suffered the complete collapse of his already poor health. The constant discouragement produced by such disappointing results of ventures undertaken with every hope of success prompted Claiborne in 1849 to turn from the speculation and newspaper work that brought only a precarious living at best and to purchase Laurel Wood plantation.

Grown cautious through previous experiences, however, Claiborne sought a means of supplementing the income he expected to derive from his plantation. He gained that additional security in 1853, when he was appointed to a government sinecure by President Franklin Pierce. He had become a friend of Pierce when the two men had served together in Congress, and during the campaign of 1852 he had supported Pierce in the *Louisiana Courier*.<sup>5</sup> After the election Pierce offered Claiborne “an eligible diplomatic position abroad or a comfortable berth in Washington.” But Claiborne proposed instead that Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana be combined into one timber district and that “the care of the public timber therein should be confided to him, with an appropriate salary.” Pierce made the appointment, and in 1857 President [James B.] Buchanan reappointed Claiborne to the post.<sup>6</sup> Immediately following his first appointment as timber agent Claiborne moved to “Laurel Wood.”

Fronting on the Gulf of Mexico at Mulatto Bayou, Laurel Wood lay between Bay St. Louis and the Rigolets in southern Hancock County,

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<sup>1</sup> Contract signed by Claiborne, William M. Gwin, and John D. Freeman, October 14, 1839, J. F. H. Claiborne Papers (Library of Congress).

<sup>2</sup> C. E. Cain (ed.), “Letter from J. F. H. Claiborne to Richard Abbey,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, VI (January 1944), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Court order directing the sheriff of Adams County, Mississippi, to take Claiborne into custody, January 14, 1839, Claiborne Papers (Library of Congress).

<sup>4</sup> Claiborne became editor of the *Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette* in 1841, editor of the New Orleans *Jeffersonian* and the New Orleans *Statesman* in 1846, and editor of the *Louisiana Courier* in 1850.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin L. Riley, “Life of Col. J. F. H. Claiborne,” *Mississippi Historical Society, Publications*, VII (1903), 232.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-233.

approximately twelve miles from Fort Pike. Though isolated by a pine forest and salt marshes, it had easy access to plantations on the banks of the nearby Pearl River. Built in 1800 by slave labor, the small house with pitched tin roof was supported by high brick piers joined by iron bars to hold Negroes brought ashore from slave ships in the early days of the century. Slave quarters were located to the rear of the main structure.<sup>7</sup>

Though he had little training or experience in plantation management, Claiborne made a financial success of the plantation. His devotion to agricultural pursuits is indicated in a letter to Benjamin L. C. Wailes in 1856, in which Claiborne wrote that he contemplated the publication of a farm monthly to be called the *Sea Shore Farmer*.<sup>8</sup> He became interested in experimenting with new crops and introduced new varieties of garden peas which he procured in France, England, and Germany. His account of their cultivation was published in 1857 in the agricultural report of the Commissioner of Patents.<sup>9</sup> Claiborne raised potatoes and other vegetables in quantity and had extensive orange groves. Some of his orange trees had been producing for sixty years, he maintained, and still yielded a substantial revenue, bringing ten dollars a thousand at the New Orleans market.<sup>10</sup>

The principal crop on Claiborne's plantation was long staple or sea island cotton. A correspondent for a New Orleans newspaper reported in June 1858, after seeing Claiborne's cotton:

We yesterday examined the sample of twenty-two bales Sea Island cotton, sold in this city a few days since. This cotton was grown upon the plantation of Colonel J. F. H. Claiborne and Major Andrew Jackson, on Pearl River, Hancock County, Mississippi, and was sold at the handsome price of 35, 40, and 44 cents, 16 bales bringing 40 cents per pound; the whole consignment of 22 bales netting to the enterprising planters something over \$2250 after deducting freights, commissions, and all other charges.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *Mississippi Gulf Coast: Yesterday and Today, 1699-1939* (Gulfport, 1939), 116.

<sup>8</sup> Charles S. Sydnor, *A Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region: Benjamin L. C. Wailes* (Durham, 1938), 137.

<sup>9</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, "Report of an Experiment of Nine Varieties of Garden Peas, by J. F. H. Claiborne of Laurel Wood Plantation, Hancock County, Mississippi," *Report of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year 1856: Agriculture* (Washington, 1857), 314.

<sup>10</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, "The Pine District of Mississippi," *Jackson Weekly Clarion*, December 27, 1876.

<sup>11</sup> New Orleans *Picayune*, June 6, 1858.

At the start of the Civil War, when Claiborne's one hundred slaves produced an average of eight hundred pounds of seed cotton to the acre,<sup>12</sup> he was out of debt and had an annual income of six thousand dollars.<sup>13</sup>

At "Laurel Wood," with more leisure than he had enjoyed at any prior period, Claiborne was able to devote his energies to scholarly and cultural pursuits. In view of his long experience in political arenas, his services in various elective and appointive offices, and the prominent role his ancestors had played in the development of the Old Southwest, it is not surprising that he exhibited a serious historical interest. In 1858 Claiborne was associated with Benjamin L. C. Wailes, Joseph B. Cobb, the author of *Mississippi Scenes*, and Benjamin W. Sanders, the state librarian, in the organization of the Mississippi Historical Society.<sup>14</sup> Claiborne also maintained an extensive correspondence with some of the leading historians of the day, including Charles Gayarré, Albert James Pickett, John W. Monette, Benson J. Lossing, and Lyman C. Draper.

By the eve of the Civil War Claiborne was devoting as much of his time and talent to historical writing as could be spared from his plantation responsibilities. During the four years immediately preceding the beginning of the war Claiborne wrote at Laurel Wood two biographies, a series of articles, and several short sketches for an encyclopedia. Moreover, there are indications that he was at work on other pieces of writing that were never published,<sup>15</sup> and that he wrote several segments of his *Mississippi* during the same period.

A few months before the inauguration of President Buchanan, when the nation was anticipating the president-elect's appointments, Claiborne wrote for the New Orleans *Delta* an article on "The Cabinet—Past and Present,"<sup>16</sup> a study of the roles of major cabinet officers in the administrations, from Washington to Van Buren. At about the same time he prepared, again for the *Delta*, his "Recollections of the Metropolitan

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<sup>12</sup> Claiborne, "The Pine District of Mississippi," Jackson *Weekly Clarion*, December 27, 1876.

<sup>13</sup> Cain (ed.), "Letter from J. F. H. Claiborne to Richard Abbey," *Journal of Mississippi History*, VI, 49.

<sup>14</sup> Z. T. Leavell, "The Ante-Bellum Historical Society of Mississippi," Mississippi Historical Society, *Publications*, VIII (1904), 228.

<sup>15</sup> Among Claiborne's contemplated writings was a political study of the antebellum South. J. F. H. Claiborne, *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman, Major-General, U.S.A., and Governor of the State of Mississippi*, 2 vols. (New York, 1860), I, vii-viii.

<sup>16</sup> Reprinted in *ibid.*, 231.

Press,”<sup>17</sup> a series of brief, intimate sketches of prominent editors he had known in Washington. In 1859 Claiborne’s study of *The Houmas Land Claims* of Louisiana appeared in pamphlet form.<sup>18</sup>

During the Civil War *Harper’s Magazine* published an article Claiborne had submitted earlier entitled “Rough Riding Down South.”<sup>19</sup> Essentially a study of social conditions in the Piney Woods and the seashore counties of Mississippi, the sketch was composed largely of anecdotes of the political campaigns of Powhatan Ellis, Harry Cage, and Franklin E. Plummer. In 1860, while Claiborne was in New York supervising the publication of two books, he met George Ripley, who solicited from him sketches of Seargent Smith Prentiss and other leading Mississippi figures for the *New American Encyclopaedia*.<sup>20</sup> In his *Life of Sam Dale*, Claiborne claimed to have written “an elaborate memoir of Mr. Prentiss for a historical work on which I am engaged.”<sup>21</sup> But the memoir was never published. And in his *Life of Quitman*, Claiborne stated that he had begun a biography of George Poindexter “based on his own correspondence and manuscripts.”<sup>22</sup> It is probable that the manuscript referred to became the basis for the lengthy sketch of Poindexter that appears in Claiborne’s *Mississippi*.

During 1860 Claiborne published two biographies of men prominent in the early history of his state. His *Life and Times of Gen. Sam Dale*, the *Mississippi Partisan* was brief, popularly written, romantic, and largely fictional; his *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman, Major-General, U.S.A., and Governor of the State of Mississippi* was lengthy, scholarly, sedate, and entirely veritable.

Claiborne’s major historical contribution, *Mississippi, as a Province, Territory and State*, was the achievement of his later life. But the short span of time that began in 1857, only to be terminated four years later by the exigencies of war, marked the most productive literary period of his career.

At Laurel Wood Claiborne also resumed his active participation

<sup>17</sup> Reprinted in J. F. H. Claiborne, *Life and Times of Gen. Sam Dale, the Mississippi Partisan* (New York, 1860), 190-203.

<sup>18</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, *The Houmas Land Claims; A Letter from John Claiborne, Esq., to Hon. C. T. Bemis, Accompanied by a Letter from the Hon. John Slidell to Mr. Claiborne* (New Orleans, 1859).

<sup>19</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, “Rough Riding Down South,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, XXV (June, 1862), 29-37.

<sup>20</sup> George Ripley, New York, to Claiborne, November 14, 1860, J. F. H. Claiborne Papers (University of North Carolina).

<sup>21</sup> Claiborne, *Sam Dale*, 222n.

<sup>22</sup> Claiborne, *Quitman*, I, 107n.

in Mississippi politics. In 1853 he was Albert Gallatin Brown's chief lieutenant in the southern counties when Brown was a candidate for the United States Senate.<sup>23</sup> The following year it was charged by the opposition that Claiborne was active in gerrymandering congressional districts in southern Mississippi,<sup>24</sup> and that he worked with Brown and Quitman in controlling the patronage in that area.<sup>25</sup> In the 1855 election, when Claiborne managed Quitman's race for Congress in Hancock, Jackson, Perry, and Greene counties, Brown and Governor John J. McRae expressed confidence that Claiborne would have little difficulty in managing the seaboard counties.<sup>26</sup>

Always a partisan of the Democratic Party, Claiborne gave freely of his fortune as well as of his talents to further the cause of his party. He claimed to have contributed at least ten thousand dollars to Democratic coffers before the Civil War.<sup>27</sup> He was mentioned as a candidate to fill the congressional post left vacant in 1858 by the death of Quitman, but he declined the honor.<sup>28</sup> In 1860 he was listed as a Douglas elector on the ballot for the fifth district in Mississippi.<sup>29</sup>

During the 1850s, in addition to his other activities, Claiborne acted as a claims agent and probably as a lobbyist. Earlier he had advertised in a New Orleans newspaper, offering his services "for prosecuting claims, or anything requiring government action." Listing his congressional experience, he advised interested parties to contact him through the offices of Senators Robert J. Walker or Henry Johnson.<sup>30</sup> That his search for clients was not without success is indicated by the fact that Claiborne was approached by John Calhoun, president of the New Orleans and Jackson Railroad, who sought to hire him to represent the railroad before the legislature of Mississippi in 1856. Calhoun wrote that he knew "from past experience, how potent" Claiborne was "in matters of this kind," and indicated that he desired Claiborne to secure the passage of a bill which

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<sup>23</sup> James Byrne Ranck, *Albert Gallatin Brown: Radical Southern Nationalist* (New York, 1937), 109.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>26</sup> Claiborne, *Quitman*, II, 215.

<sup>27</sup> Isaac M. Patridge, "The Press of Mississippi," *De Bow's Commercial Review*, XXIX (October 1860), 509.

<sup>28</sup> *Nashville Daily News*, August 12, 1858.

<sup>29</sup> J. W. R. Taylor, Holly Springs, to Claiborne, August 30, 1860, Claiborne Papers (University of North Carolina).

<sup>30</sup> Newspaper clipping dated New Orleans, February 25, 1845, *ibid.*

would permit the railroad to issue \$2,000,000 in new stock for the purpose of extending the line to Canton.<sup>31</sup>

At the start of the Civil War, torn between a dual allegiance and love for his state and his nation, Claiborne at first tried to follow the middle ground, secluding himself at Laurel Wood to weather out the war in isolation. But when it became apparent to him that he would have to take a firmer stand and align himself with one camp or the other, he cast his lot with the Union. Once having taken the irrevocable step of supporting the Union against the Confederacy, he worked wholeheartedly for the cause he espoused.

It seems somewhat paradoxical that Claiborne should have become an ardent Union man. *His Life of Quitman*, published on the eve of the war, was above all a poignant defense of the state-rights doctrines for which the South claimed to be fighting. As a cotton planter who felt that he had suffered under unjust tariff laws he saw the advantages to be gained from southern independence; as the owner of one hundred slaves he could expect to be ruined financially by the emancipation that would surely follow a northern victory; as the father of a son who died fighting in the Confederate service he was tied by blood to the Confederate cause; as a lifelong neighbor and acquaintance of some of the major political figures of the Confederacy he was bound to the government at Richmond by bonds of friendship and sympathy. Yet, despite the existence of such strong reasons for supporting the South, Claiborne took the more difficult course and worked for a Union victory. His reasons for doing so, though perhaps not obvious, weighed more heavily than any possible temptations he might have had to become a Confederate. He was the bearer of a name that had in the past shone in the annals of the Southwest under the old Republic. He took seriously his duties as United States timber agent and could not betray a government he was pledged to support. Always essentially a Jacksonian Democrat, he placed the Union above the states. Claiborne was certainly a theoretical secessionist in 1860, but he never went so far as to want to put his theories into practice.

With the outbreak of hostilities Claiborne sent his wife and daughters to Natchez, but he remained at Laurel Wood to supervise his plantation.<sup>32</sup> Three months after the inauguration of President Lincoln, Claiborne

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<sup>31</sup> J. Calhoun, New Orleans, to Claiborne, February 27, 1856; J. F. H. Claiborne Papers (Mississippi Department of Archives and History).

<sup>32</sup> Riley, "Life of Col. J. F. H. Claiborne," Mississippi Historical Society, *Publications*, VII, 234.



regretfully resigned his post as timber agent.<sup>33</sup> He was commissioned in August 1861, to administer oaths and to take acknowledgements of deeds and other papers for the Confederate government in southern Mississippi.<sup>34</sup> During the war he purchased several thousand dollars worth of Confederate bonds.<sup>35</sup>

To all casual observers Claiborne appeared to be a loyal supporter of the Confederacy, albeit a passive adherent to the cause. In actuality he was undoubtedly the most active advocate of the Union in southern Mississippi. In the summer of 1862 Claiborne wrote Governor John J. Pettus to deplore the starving condition of the inhabitants of the seaboard counties, as well as depredations of Yankee invaders. Affirming his own fidelity, he wrote, "We are now proving our loyalty by starvation—by the tears of our women and the cries of our children for bread!" and begged permission to import essential foodstuffs from enemy-held New Orleans in order to preserve the lives of loyal supporters of the Confederacy living along the coast.<sup>36</sup> But at the same time he carried on a voluminous correspondence with Major General Nathaniel P. Banks, the Union commander at New Orleans. To Banks, Claiborne wrote very differently of his neighbors on the seaboard:

Few of them can be addressed through their moral sense or convictions of duty. They are essentially animal. They have but a dim idea of government—none whatever of political principle. When Civil War broke out they eagerly volunteered . . . with the hope of plunder. But the mortality that has occurred among them . . . has disgusted them with the service. Most of all, they feel the pressure of want in their families . . . They are now subsisting on sweet potatoes; that crop will be exhausted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Feb. *Want*, I repeat is producing in their animal natures, a great re-action. It brings reflection. Reflection brings regret. Regret, repentance. The Union sentiment is spreading . . . A vigorous exclusion would bring this whole seaboard to its allegiance in 3 months.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, Hancock County, to General N. P. Banks, December 23, 1862, Nathaniel P. Banks Papers (Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts).

<sup>34</sup> Commission dated August 1861, Claiborne Papers (Library of Congress).

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum dated July 4, 1863, *ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, Shieldsboro, to J. J. Pettus, August 4, 1862, and August 15, 1862, Governors' Records, Series E., Vol. 54 (Mississippi Department of Archives and History).

<sup>37</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne], Memorandum to Banks [enclosed with letter of December 23, 1862], Banks Papers.

Claiborne's correspondence with the Union commander began late in December 1862, when he wrote to Banks for "advice and protection." Introducing himself as a man who out of his "own convictions of duty" had "remained at home, pursuing my usual business, confiding in the U. S. military authorities for the protection of my property," Claiborne assured the general that he had "maintained *confidential* relations" with the Union officers at Fort Pike and had from them "strong testimonials of the services I have rendered." Reaffirming his loyalty to the Union, Claiborne stated his position in unequivocal terms:

Does the Proclamation of the President affect the loyal as well as the disloyal? Does the mere fact of my residence *in Mississippi*, reduce me to the condition of an enemy of the Union, to which I am bound by all the traditions of my family? Can I reside here on or after 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. and lawfully hold my colored people as bondsmen? I have the Southern views on the subject of slavery; I wish to retain my people; but if I cannot lawfully do so, and the Government, for public use desires to appropriate them, I will cheerfully send them within your lines, relying on the U. S. to do me justice. I have ever treated my people more as wards than as slaves. I never had an overseer. I never used a whip. I have clothed & fed them abundantly, and every industrious adult on my place has realized for *themselves* [*sic*] from \$75 to \$100 per annum. I had, for the next year, allotted to them 100 acres of land, to be planted in cotton for themselves, I aiding them to cultivate it with my teams . . . I was advised long since to retreat into the interior, as most slave holders, in exposed sections, have done. I refused to do so . . . I am now derided by the disloyal for my credulity. I still retain my faith, and apply to you, General, for advice . . . Surrounded here by armed men, mostly of desperate character & fortunes, my person in danger, and my property liable to be plundered, I have been compelled to be circumspect. But I have neglected no means to further the cause. I *have* created a strong Union sentiment, which is rapidly developing.<sup>38</sup>

On five separate occasions during the month of July 1863, Claiborne informed Banks of the activities of saltmakers and tannery operators

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<sup>38</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, Hancock County, to Banks, December 23, 1862, *ibid.*

on the Gulf Coast. To Claiborne's chagrin, the leatherworkers were systematically stripping the bark from live oak trees which had been set aside as a reserve for the United States Navy for use in the tanneries they had erected at Bay St. Louis.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, a great quantity of salt was being produced for military and civilian use. According to Claiborne, Governor Pettus had contracted for 100,000 bushels of salt at thirty-five dollars a bushel.<sup>40</sup> In one letter Claiborne suggested, "If you could shell those places, & seize the salt-boilers, we should get rid of the guerillas and their sympathizers."<sup>41</sup> In subsequent memorandums he reported that saltmaking was proceeding at a rate of five hundred bushels a day,<sup>42</sup> and that twenty wagon loads of salt had been shipped to General Joseph E. Johnston's army.<sup>43</sup>

As the war progressed and Union victories became more frequent, Claiborne sent more valuable information. In July 1863, he told Banks of fortifications being erected at Mobile, of the location and size of Johnston's army, of the movements of General William J. Hardee, and of the location of a Confederate train of four hundred wagons.<sup>44</sup> Claiborne was particularly energetic in 1863 in informing Banks of the smuggling trade carried on between New Orleans, the Rigolets, and Mississippi coastal towns, naming "the Alice, the Venus & other vessels" that "regularly bring out contraband" and implicating the sutler at Fort Pike.<sup>45</sup> Early in the following year he reported the construction of seven Confederate rams on the Alabama River. "Two of them, the Tennessee and the Nashville, are very powerful, mounted with six guns," Claiborne wrote, "It is believed that they can sink any vessel of the blockade fleet; and there is good reason to believe that the attempt will *shortly be made*."<sup>46</sup>

On two occasions Claiborne was able to supply General Banks with the names of persons serving the Confederacy in New Orleans, the general's own headquarters. On July 10, 1863, Claiborne wrote:

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<sup>39</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne] to Banks, July 10, 1863, *ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne to Banks, July 22, 1863, *ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne] to Banks, July 27, 1863, *ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne], Memorandum to Banks [enclosed with letter of July 28, 1863], *ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne], Memorandum to Banks [enclosed with letter of December 12, 1863], *ibid*.

<sup>46</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne] to Banks, January 12, 1864, *ibid*.

Arrangements are making to run the blockade to Havana from two points on this coast. The parties engaged in it have all been in or are in the Confederate service. *They have two men in New Orleans*—a Capt. Dane or Dean & one Asa Weed (who was once arrested here as a spy, and liberated with a view to this very object) *employed to give them information about your movements, the movements of the blockading squadron* etc. Dane & Weed communicate with one of the parties here, by means of a schooner (The Venus) which makes a weekly trip from the city to Toomer’s Mill near Fort Pike, and the information they give is duly sent to Jackson. Weed or Dane, or both of them are soon to visit *your camp at Port Hudson*.<sup>47</sup>

Later in the same month Claiborne intercepted and copied several letters destined for Confederate sympathizers in New Orleans. One such letter, addressed to Mason Pilcher of the Bank of New Orleans, showed that the bank had “advanced \$405,000 to the Richmond authorities; that it is now in communication with Richmond; and in all probability, making arrangements to export, unlawfully, on its own acct. near 7 million lbs. cotton, or to dispose of the same to the blockade runners of Mobile.” In transmitting the copies of the letters Claiborne wrote, “If you use them, Genl., pray do so in a way not to lead even to a surmise how your information was obtained. My position here is very precarious & the registered enemies in Mobile are doing their best to have me arrested.”<sup>48</sup>

Late in 1863 Claiborne became involved in a grandiose scheme of treason that reached into the Confederate State Department and into the very heart of its operations abroad. The episode began with a letter from Claiborne to Banks, dated December 12, 1863, headed “Strictly Confidential”:

There is at my house a confidential, accredited agent of J. P. Benjamin, who may be induced to give intelligence of vital importance to you, and to the Government: 1. In relation to matters in Eastern Texas. 2. Operations on the Mississippi—plans of Gen. Johnson [*sic*] to interrupt navigation – scouts – light batteries – torpedoes – mode and place of crossing the river – how these plans may be defeated. 3. The Union sentiment

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<sup>47</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne] to Banks, July 10, 1863, *ibid*.

<sup>48</sup> [J. F. H. Claiborne] to Banks, July 27, 1863, *ibid*.

in Mississippi – and how in 60 days a combined movement may be had to throw off the Jeff Davis yoke. 4. Mr. Benjamin's operations abroad, in all their ramifications. This gentleman has twice run the blockade with dispatches for Slidell, Mason & other agents. He knows them all intimately . . . . He holds the commission of Mr. Benjamin, accrediting him to the various rebel emissaries in Europe, and can be induced to place their dispatches in the hands of Mr. Seward.<sup>49</sup>

General Banks was, of course, interested in meeting Claiborne's friend. The young agent of Secretary Benjamin was spirited from Laurel Wood to Banks's headquarters in New Orleans, where he was identified as Benjamin W. Sanders, the former state librarian of Mississippi.<sup>50</sup> Banks immediately sent the young man to Washington. The success of Sanders's visit to Union headquarters was attested by a letter he sent to Banks from Havana late in January 1864:

I avail myself of the first suitable opportunity to apprise you of the result of my mission to Washington and the manner in which I was received by the President and the Hon. Sec. of State . . . Sec. Seward did not hesitate for a moment to approve of the plan for thwarting the enemy's movements abroad. He adopted all my propositions . . . I am here, now, *enroute* for England and France, and will sail for Southampton on the next steamer.<sup>51</sup>

The extent of actual assistance rendered to the Union cause by Claiborne's activities can only be guessed. Sanders's treason, for example, doubtless would have caused considerable injury to the Confederacy had Claiborne been able to induce him to turn traitor earlier in the war before European powers became convinced of the hopelessness of southern chances for victory.

It is doubtful that Claiborne's services to the Union were entirely divorced from his immediate economic interests; at any rate, he did not allow his adventures in espionage to interfere with his business activities. He continued to produce cotton at "Laurel Wood," and, by engaging himself to serve as purchasing agent in the Confederacy for the Belgian consul

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<sup>49</sup> C[laiborne] to Banks, December 12, 1863, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> B. W. Sanders, New Orleans, to Banks, January 2, 1864, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> B. W. Sanders, Havana, to Banks, January 22, 1864, *ibid.*

at New Orleans, was able to transport through the lines, under a pass issued by Admiral David G. Farragut and General W. K. Emory,<sup>52</sup> his own cotton and cotton purchased from planters on the Pearl River. The Confederate authorities did not long remain in ignorance of Claiborne's intrigues, but in the absence of absolute proof of an overt act of trade with the enemy, they were unable to interfere. In letters written in October 1863, Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin and Secretary of War James A. Seddon discussed Claiborne's cotton shipments. Benjamin wrote:

I have the honor to acknowledge receipt of your favor of 29<sup>th</sup> instant, enclosing a report relative to the trade carried on by Mr. Claiborne as agent of the Belgian consul at New Orleans. The trade is one evidently illegal, and is, in point of fact, a trade with the port of New Orleans covered up under the disguise of a trade with neutral vessels . . . it is necessary to have the papers now in possession of Mr. Claiborne proving the assent of the enemy's officers to the shipment of the cotton . . . I refrain from suggesting anything on the subject of breaking up this illegal traffic, as I take it for granted that you have made up your mind what course to pursue on that point.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps Claiborne's position during the Civil War is best summed up by a passage in his *Mississippi* in which he defended the Loyalists who fled to West Florida during the American Revolution, and whose course paralleled his own:

It has been the custom to denounce these men as . . . enemies of their country. Such censure would be proper when applied to men who drew the sword against their countrymen, and waged upon them a savage and relentless war. But the same sentence should not be pronounced on those whose sense of loyalty and of duty forbade them to fight . . . but rather than stain their hands with kindred blood, renounced home, comfort, society and position . . . The right of conscience and of opinion is sacred, and at this

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<sup>52</sup> Pass signed by Admiral D. G. Farragut and endorsed by General W. K. Emory, May 13, 1863; and Cuthbert Bullitt, acting collector of customs, New Orleans, to Belgian Consulate at New Orleans, May 12, 1863, Claiborne Papers (Library of Congress).

<sup>53</sup> *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. and index (Washington, 1894-1927), Ser. I, Vol. XX, 848.

distance of time these men, once generally condemned, may be properly appreciated.<sup>54</sup>

On July 26, 1865, Claiborne took the amnesty oath, professing his allegiance to the United States,<sup>55</sup> and for all practical purposes, he became closely aligned with the carpetbag government in his state. In 1869, when L. C. Nowell, the Republican political boss at Pass Christian, nominated Claiborne on a fusion ticket,<sup>56</sup> the historian declined the nomination in an open letter to the Handsboro *Democrat*, saying, "I stand without a party—owing allegiance to none; in fellowship with none; asking favors of none; under obligation to none; and I can bring no strength to those who wish me to unfurl their standard."<sup>57</sup> But despite his protestations of political independence, he advocated the candidacy of General Ulysses S. Grant. Of President Andrew Johnson, Claiborne said, "I doubt not he was met at the bar of God by the accusing spirit of Mrs. Suratt, and is now suffering the penalty of his crimes."<sup>58</sup> Claiborne became a favorite of Adelbert Ames, the carpetbag governor and senator from Mississippi. Ames worked to secure the payment by the federal government of Claiborne's claims for damages suffered at Laurel Wood during the war,<sup>59</sup> and Claiborne reciprocated, according to Ames, by writing "articles in defense of Genl. Grant at a time when such articles were, if not necessary, at least very gratifying to the General."<sup>60</sup> Under the pseudonym "Moderator," Claiborne prepared letters for the editor of the New Orleans *Pilot* calling for a third term for President Grant.<sup>61</sup>

Claiborne remained at Laurel Wood for five years after the end of the war. In 1870, on the death of his mother-in-law, Martha W. Dunbar, he inherited Dunbarton plantation and moved to Natchez.<sup>62</sup> Claiborne continued to hold his Gulf Coast lands, but after 1870 his visits to Laurel Wood gradually became less frequent. His last prolonged visit

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<sup>54</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi, as a Province, Territory and State, with Biographical Notices of Eminent Citizens* (Jackson, 1880), I, 103.

<sup>55</sup> Certificate dated July 26, 1865, Claiborne Papers (Library of Congress).

<sup>56</sup> L. C. Nowell, Pass Christian, to Claiborne, July 27, 1869, *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Handsboro *Democrat*, August 10, 1869.

<sup>58</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, Natchez, to General R. Lowry, September 13, 1878, Claiborne Papers (University of North Carolina).

<sup>59</sup> Adelbert Ames, Washington, to Claiborne, February 21, 1873, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Adelbert Ames, Breckville, to Mr. Casey, July 19, 1873, *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> John M. A. Parker, surveyor of customs, New Orleans, to Claiborne, July 25, 1874, *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Memorandum prepared for Franklin L. Riley by M. C. Garrett, Claiborne Papers (Library of Congress).

to the coast occurred in 1876, when he was invited to speak at Bay St. Louis during the centennial celebration on July 4, 1876. He addressed his former neighbors,<sup>63</sup> concluding his talk, fittingly, with a poignant plea for national unity and for an end to sectional animosities. This visit rekindled his interest in the Gulf Coast and stimulated him to compose his reminiscences of Laurel Wood during ante-bellum days.<sup>64</sup> The remaining few years of his life Claiborne spent at Natchez writing his monumental history of Mississippi.

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<sup>63</sup> The address was published as J. F. H. Claiborne, *Historical Account of Hancock County and the Sea Board of Mississippi* (New Orleans, 1876).

<sup>64</sup> Claiborne, "The Pine District of Mississippi," *Jackson Weekly Clarion*, December 27, 1876.



