



Episode 4, 2006: Calhoun Books Spartanburg, South Carolina

Gwen Wright: Our next story investigates how one man's study of the Roman Empire may have helped spark the American Civil War. [Gunshots firing] It's March 1850, and South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun is on his deathbed in Washington, D.C. For years, Calhoun has occupied the center of the political stage, first as an ardent nationalist, and in later years as a passionate advocate for states' rights and a defender of slavery. Now in his final days, he makes a startling prediction: the Republic will dissolve, and there will be war. And indeed, 11 years later in 1861, the South would abandon the Union, and a Carolina militia would fire the first shots of the Civil War at Fort Sumter. [Multiple gunshots firing] Calhoun's influence on these events cannot be overstated. His legacy is marked throughout the South with grand monuments. A man in South Carolina recently bought a six-volume set of books from a small-town library and made what may be an astonishing find.

Brad: They're really old and really dusty, and I came across these signatures on the title pages of each volume.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright, and I'm visiting Brad in his hometown of Spartanburg, South Carolina, to check into his story. "The history of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" by Edward Gibbon. It must be over a million words. So how'd you come to acquire these?

Brad: There's a small library in Edgefield, South Carolina, that had books for sale, so I picked them up, and I found that on the title page of each volume was what appeared to be a signature of John C. Calhoun.

Gwen: It's very faint. Brad may have found something significant. Calhoun was the most intellectual of Southern leaders in the 19th century. These books are the most famous work of the English historian, Edward Gibbon, in which he studied the politics of the Roman Empire. Did you know that Gibbon was considered one of the first modern historians?

Brad: No, I didn't.

Gwen: It's because this set of books was trying to explain how and why the empire became so powerful and then fell apart. Tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out, Brad.

Brad: Well, I'd like you to find out if the books were once owned by John C. Calhoun and if they might have influenced his political philosophy at all.

Brad: Well, do you have anything else for me to go on than the books themselves?

Brad: I found tucked away in these books an index card that says that these books may have been sold by John C. Calhoun to the James Madison Abney family in Edgefield County, South Carolina, who then gave these books to the library where I purchased them.

Gwen: Well, I'm quite intrigued by this story. I'll get back to you as soon as I learn something.

Brad: Thank you. I look forward to hearing.

Gwen: Before I hit the road, I want to take a closer look at Brad's books. These date from, let's see, 1789. That would have been one of the first editions. They say you can tell a lot about a man from the books in his library. In these volumes Gibbon wrestled with the essential questions of why some regimes survive and others fail. If Calhoun read Gibbon, he was confronting similar issues. Gibbon knew how to tell an exciting story, and he influenced a number of important statesmen well into the 20th century. I think it was Winston Churchill who said, "I devoured Gibbon, and I rode through him triumphantly from the first volume to the last." It's an intriguing idea that these books might have belonged to John C. Calhoun. Is it possible that Gibbon's History of Rome helped shape Calhoun's thinking about the political conflict which stirred the Civil War? Well, this is interesting. There's some writing, I think in pencil, here on the inside of the back cover, but it's so faint now. It's totally illegible. I need to find out a little more about both Calhoun and Gibbon. But first I'm going to check these signatures and see if we can make anything out of the faded writing in the books. I'm meeting forensic document examiner Emily Will. Hi, Emily.

Emily Will: Hi, Gwen.

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Gwen: Good to see you. So what do you have for me?

Emily: This is the signature from the book, and this is a known Calhoun signature. So what you see here is, these aren't closed circles but they're open at about the 1:00 or 2:00 position.

Gwen: In the same place on both.

Emily: In the same place and in the same basic shape. And then we have a similar "l" and a connecting stroke to the top of the "h." That's very similar, it seems. Yes.

Gwen: Emily also notices some major differences in the signatures. Ours has fully formed letters of similar height. But in his official signature, Calhoun's letters taper off. And the end of the signature, it kind of falls apart, it's just a wavering line.

Emily: Well, there was also some writing at the back of that book.

Gwen: Yes. Did you find anything on that?

Emily: Yes, I did. I've used the Video Spectral Comparator, which is a device that extends human vision into the infrared. The carbon in the pencil absorbs infrared, and it becomes dark against the paper.

Gwen: At first, it seems the new technology is going to bring the old text back to life.

Emily: This says, "Cohorts consisting of 500 to 600 men, ten cohorts constituting a legion."

Gwen: But Emily tells me the writing is just too far gone.

Emily: And I cannot read beyond that part.

Gwen: It's frustrating. Whoever wrote this seemed to have been taking notes about the Roman military. Calhoun was extremely interested in military affairs. In fact, he served as Secretary of War. Well, it's fascinating. It's also very frustrating. We can't say for sure that this is Calhoun. I'm heading to Fort Hill Plantation, Calhoun's former home in South Carolina's Upcountry. I've brought some reading for the ride. Calhoun was born in South Carolina in 1782 at the dawn of American independence. In his early career, he was a staunch defender of the Union, arguing for a strong federal government, a powerful military, and a central bank. He held several posts in government and was twice elected vice president. But in 1832, Calhoun quit the vice presidency. He began to agitate for southern agricultural interests, believing northern manufacturers had too much control over national affairs. He famously argued that states had the right to nullify, or overrule, federal law. His zealous defense of the South earned him the nickname, "the Cast-Iron Man." Although Fort Hill was once a classic Southern cotton plantation, Calhoun was not born into privilege or education. His pioneer father had fought the Indians, and as a boy Calhoun worked the fields of the family farm. I'm meeting with Calhoun historian Kendra Hamilton. So I presume with this frontier background that there was not a lot of education, which we might associate with the South in Calhoun's early life.

Kendra Hamilton: Absolutely not. He was virtually illiterate until he was 13 years old. And then at that time he was sent off to get an education with his brother-in-law.

Gwen: Kendra says that a hunger for books transformed Calhoun from farm boy to future statesman. Suddenly he was immersing himself in Voltaire and Locke and reading the life of Charles V and reading about Cook's voyages. He just completely glutted himself to the point where his family became concerned that his health might be in jeopardy. Calhoun's view of slavery may also be a clue. Kendra says that as he and his fellow planters grew rich from cotton and slavery, Calhoun became less interested in defending the union and more concerned with fending off attacks from northern abolitionists. He believed that slavery was the best way to, you know, form a hedge against mob rule. Calhoun had a very pessimistic view of human character. He rejected all that talk about natural rights and inalienable rights. He

believed in the inequality of man. The southern planters were attracted to all things Roman. Abolitionists quoted from the Bible to condemn slavery. Since Rome had been a slave state, Calhoun and the planters turned to the classics to defend slavery in the South. They compared their civilization, which they considered to be the height of anything that was then existent in the world. They looked back to Greece and Rome and made those parallels. In fact, we see this little bust of Calhoun here draped in a toga. that's a very characteristic type of pose. Well, Kendra, do you think that Calhoun would have read Gibbon's decline and fall of the Roman Empire?

Kendra: I have never read a specific reference to Calhoun's having read Gibbon.

Gwen: Figuring out if Calhoun ever owned our Gibbon volumes may be impossible. According to Kendra, many of the books in Calhoun's personal library burned in a fire in the late 1800s. I'm meeting Calhoun scholar H. Lee Cheek at the Civil War ruins in Columbia, South Carolina, where Sherman's troops burned antebellum mansions to the ground. Cheek believes that Calhoun is a largely misunderstood figure, and that he spent much of his political life trying to avoid the destruction the Civil War produced.

H. Lee Cheek: I think Calhoun is really best thought of as one of the last of the founding fathers. He was trained in a classical manner, somebody who revered power restrained, not power abused.

Gwen: He disagrees with Kendra and believes that Calhoun's support for slavery was in many ways a response to what he saw as the dangerous, radical ideas of abolitionists. But his view of slavery really was that it was, for this moment, a temporary institution that would dissipate over time. So it wasn't so much that he was against change in any way; he was against dangerous, precipitous, sudden change.

Cheek: Yes, social upheavals, which he thought would be worse for all people in the South, and really, all people in the country.

Gwen: Cheek believes Calhoun may have seen parallels between the fate of Rome and the fate of the United States. One of Gibbon's great and I think most neglected criticisms is there's a difference between the stability of a regime and an empire. Calhoun believed in preserving the regime of which he was part and which he deeply loved, but he feared empires. Cheek says Calhoun's sense of civic obligation would have attracted him to Rome, and, in his later years, he would have seen the power of the federal government as an amoral force imposed on the South. Gibbon revered the Roman Republic, as Calhoun would as well, from a political, and an historical, and really any kind of social sense. And they both had a high appreciation for virtue in the citizenry, and virtue had to be perpetuated. There were certain circumstances that diminished virtue. For example, when you create an empire and you do those kinds of things, expansion of power, you centralize power too much in one part of government. Cheek has made what may be a very important discovery. And it's in Calhoun's own handwriting.

Cheek: This is a letter that Calhoun wrote to a young aspiring barrister by the name of Johnson in 1836. Mr. Johnson asked Calhoun, "What should I be reading in preparation for life in the law and in public affairs?"

Gwen: So let me see. "As to history he will of course study all the ancient classics, to be followed by Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. But did the volumes that Brad bought from a local library once belong to Calhoun? I'm still not certain. I'm headed to Clemson University, which houses Calhoun's papers. The index card inside one of the volumes said Calhoun sold his books to a man named Abney, an Edgefield County planter. That could be an important clue. Calhoun ran a cotton plantation, and those South Carolina planters were a very close-knit group. I'm looking through the history of the area. Here's a map of Edgefield County, which borders right on Abbeville County, where John C. Calhoun was born. The Calhouns and the Abneys were neighbors. I wonder if there are any references to an Abney in Calhoun's papers. The index points me to a letter, which turns out to contain some telling information. Huh, look at this. I think I have my answer for Brad. Well, Brad, first I want to thank you for sending me on a fascinating journey through the history of the South. Unfortunately, I can't say for sure that these are John C. Calhoun's signature.

Brad: Okay.

Gwen: Then I tell him about the discovery I'd made in the Clemson University library. Ah, here's something. Deep in the



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Calhoun archives is a copy of an 1847 letter sent to him in Washington. It's from a unit of South Carolina militia asking Calhoun to back their choice for brigadier general. And they're appealing for Calhoun's support, and they evoke with Calhoun a shared love of South Carolina. And among the signators is Joseph Abney. I tell Brad that Joseph Abney was a cousin of James Abney, the cotton planter listed on the card in his volumes. It's another piece of our puzzle that fits. So given the closeness of those two families, and of that group in particular, there's a good chance that John C. Calhoun owned those books and sold them to young Abney. I tell Brad that almost certainly his set of books shaped the thinking of one of the South's most significant public figures.

Brad: That's wonderful. Thank you so much. Definitely makes me value them more, and before they've just kind of been tucked away in a closet, but now I'd love to be able to talk about these books to other people that are interested in them.

Gwen: For many, the cast-iron man, John Calhoun, is a model of Calvinist rectitude, a statesman who struggled to keep the nation from war. but for others, Calhoun's Achilles' heel was his belief that a nation could long endure while a fifth of its population were not free. Calhoun's major blind spot was slavery. He never could have a nuanced view of the damage that was done by slavery, and as a consequence he drove the nation to disunion. There's a wonderful story that's in Whitman's Civil War diaries where he overhears two veterans talking. One says, "I've seen Calhoun's monument." The other one says, "No, you haven't seen Calhoun's monument; I have. Calhoun's monument is in the bodies of the dead and the broken and the bloodied that I've seen on the battlefields of the South."

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