

The Short Life and
Violent Times of
Preston Smith Brooks

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A Man of Mark

By

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INTRODUCTION

With both the House and the Senate scheduled for early adjournment to mark the death of Missouri Representative John G. Miller, May 22, 1856 promised to be an uneventful day in Congress. With little public business to be transacted and therefore little reason to hang about, most of the members in attendance slowly made their way toward the exits, with only a few lagging behind to confer with colleagues, frank correspondence, or simply chew the fat. But at a few minutes before one pm, the quiet murmur of voices within the Senate chamber was suddenly disrupted by the sounds of violent struggle as a South Carolina Representative named Preston Brooks approached the desk of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner where he raised a gutta-percha walking cane and began pummeling the unsuspecting Sumner into a state of near unconsciousness, landing blows with such force that the cane literally shattered in his hand, and inflicting injuries of such severity as to render Sumner a virtual invalid for the next four years.¹

To the modern observer this shocking incident, which historians have labeled the “Caning of Sumner,” seems little more than an act of savagery (as it seemed to many nineteenth-century observers). The question, then and now, is what could have provoked such an act of brutality upon an unarmed colleague? The immediate provocation, as every student of American history knows, was Brooks’s aggrieved sense of outrage over Sumner’s “Crime Against Kansas” speech, in which Sumner crudely insulted Brooks’s kinsman, Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina, and referred to him with such colorful epithets as the “Don Quixote of

¹ “Alleged Assault Upon Senator Sumner” (House Report no. 182, 34th Congress, First Session), 26, 27, 35, 57; “House of Representatives” (May 23, 1856), *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, First Session, in The Library of Congress, *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875*, 1292; William Y. Leader of Philadelphia, Testimony before Magistrate, as quoted in “The Crime Against Kansas-Appendix-The Assault” in *Charles Sumner His Complete Works* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1900), 5, 269; Preston S. Brooks, “Statement of Preston S. Brooks,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 61 (October, 1927–June, 1928), 221; David Herbert Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 291–4.

Slavery” and a “mad zealot” of “tyrannical sectionalism,” to name but a few.² Sumner went on to describe Butler as a man who had:

read many books of chivalry, and believes himself a chivalrous knight, with sentiments of honor and courage. Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight—I mean the harlot, Slavery.³

To anyone living during the mid-nineteenth century, such language, with its crude imagery and overt sexual references, could only be interpreted as an attack upon not only Senator Butler’s honor but that of the South as a whole.

That Brooks should have responded to Sumner’s remarks with violence is not surprising given its prevalence in nineteenth-century American society, and especially among Southerners. Scholars of the Old South have long noted the region’s propensity for violence and mayhem, and have attributed it to everything from “an exaggerated sense of honor” to the availability of firearms, slavery, ethnic factors, and even the climate. Indeed, if there was a trait that can be said to have been common among Southern males of all classes, it was a fascination with violence and fighting.⁴

² Charles Sumner, “The Crime Against Kansas,” in *Charles Sumner His Complete Works* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1900), 5; 144–5; Robert B. Hall, “Speech of Honorable Robert B. Hall of Massachusetts, In The House of Representatives, July 12, 1856,” *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 34th Congress, First Session, in The Library of Congress, *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875*, 886.

³ Donald, *Charles Sumner*, 295; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: the Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 122, 150; Sumner, “The Crime Against Kansas,” 144–5.

⁴ Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 13, 14, 15, 16, 62, 78–81; Nicole Etcheson, “Manliness and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1790–1860,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Spring 1995), 61, 62; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 352–61, 370; Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1982), xv, 14–18; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1968), 28–40; Jack K. Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 75, 76; Christopher J. Olsen,

It didn't help matters that Preston Brooks hailed from what, at the time, may have been the most violent community in America—Edgefield, South Carolina.⁵

So while no one should be surprised by Brooks's violent response, the specific form of violence that he employed might not have been what

Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830–1860 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171, 172; Data from Horace V. Redfield, *Homicide, North and South: Being a Comparative View of Crime Against the Person in Several Parts of the United States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1880).

⁵ During the early 1820s, Judge Thomas Belton O'Neall, then a young lawyer just beginning his career, during a stopover in Edgefield reported that the court docket was filled with "more than 200 cases for a population of only about 24,000 (black and white)." John A. Chapman, *History of Edgefield County from the Earliest Settlements to 1897* (Newberry, SC: Elbert Aull, 1897), 174; Fox Butterfield, *All God's Children: the Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14; Brian D. McKnight, "Preston Brooks," in *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: a Political, Social, and Military History*, edited by David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 288–9; William L. Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," in *American National Biography*, edited by John A. Garrity and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 625, 628; Robert Neil Mathis, "Preston Smith Brooks: the Man And His Image," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 79 (October 1978): 299, 300; Orville Vernon Burton, *In My Father's House Are Many Mansions: Family and Community in Edgefield, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 14, 20, 46, 72–3, 75, 91; Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman: South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1944), 24, 25, 31, 32; Alvy L. King, *Louis T. Wigfall, Southern Fire Eater* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35; Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 223–25; Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villainy: Crime and Retribution in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959), 37; Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 71–90; Ulysses R. Brooks, *The South Carolina Bench and Bar*, vol. 1 (Columbia: State Company, 1908), 199; See also Edward B. McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution, 1775–1780* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 144–5; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 12, 18; John Belton O'Neall, *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina*, vol. 1 (Charleston: S.G. Courtenay & Co., 1859), 36. The notion that Edgefield bred a "syndrome of violence and extremism," strong even for South Carolina, is asserted most clearly in Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 83–90.

anyone expected. Though the remarks were clearly slanderous, no self-respecting Southerner would have sought redress through the courts. That was for cowards and Yankees. The Southern Code of Honor required that abusive language of the sort used by Sumner be answered in a more direct manner, often through violent means. Senator Butler being too old and infirm to confront Sumner himself, it therefore fell to Preston Brooks, as Butler's kinsman, to "relieve Butler and avenge the insult to my State."⁶

The question naturally arises of why Brooks, despite such clear provocation, never challenged Sumner to meet on the field of honor. He certainly had ample justification for such a challenge. The most immediate reason was one of simple practicality—believing "Black Republicans" to be "incapable of courage," Brooks assumed (probably correctly) that Sumner would refuse to accept the challenge. Secondly, since dueling was illegal in the District of Columbia, Brooks further assumed that Sumner would report the challenge to the police, which might have subjected Brooks to criminal prosecution.⁷ Both of these ideas have merit, but do not

⁶ As Brooks said afterward: "I should have forfeited my own self-respect, and perhaps the good opinions of my countrymen if I had failed to resent such an injury by calling the offender in question to a personal account." John Lyde Wilson, *The Code of Honor or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling* (Charleston: James Phynney, 1858), 4, 12, accessed through Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6085/6085-h/6085-h.htm>; Preston Brooks to John Hamden Brooks, Washington, DC May 23, 1856, as quoted in Robert L. Merriwether (ed.), "Preston S. Brooks on the Caning of Charles Sumner," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 52, no. 3 (January 1951), 2; Charles Sydnor, "The Southerner and the Laws," *Journal of Southern History* 6 (1940): 3–23; Jack Kenny Williams, "The Code of Honor in Antebellum South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 54 (1953): 113–28; Donald, *Sumner*, 290, 291, 295; McPherson, *Battle Cry*, 122, 150; "Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina on the Sumner Assault," House of Representatives, July 14, 1856, in *American Orations: Studies in American Political History*, edited by Alexander Johnson and James Albert Woodburn (New York, London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1896–8), 3: 121–2; Preston S. Brooks, "Synopsis of Speech, on the 29th of August, 1856, at Columbia, South Carolina," in *The Political Text Book or Encyclopedia Containing Everything Necessary for the Reference of the Politicians and Statesmen of the United States*, edited by M. W. Cluskey (Philadelphia: James B. Smith & Co., 1860), 5; Etcheson, "Manliness," 63; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 14, 34, 138; David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 12, 17, 110–16, 222–9.

⁷ "Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina on the Sumner Assault," House of Representatives, July 14, 1856, in *American Orations: Studies in American Political History*, edited by Alexander Johnson and James Albert Woodburn (New York, London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1896–8), 3: 121–2; Preston S. Brooks,

adequately explain why Brooks, rather than seek redress through direct confrontation, instead chose to attack an unarmed and immobilized opponent. Indeed, if criminal prosecution was really Brooks's concern, why did he attack Sumner at all?

* * *

While the Caning of Sumner helped to establish Charles Sumner as a national political figure, it did not have a similar impact upon Preston Brooks's life and career. Nor has Brooks fared much better in the years since the incident. Despite the notoriety surrounding his assault on Sumner, Brooks remains a forgotten figure in American history, one in whom even professional historians have shown little interest. To date, only a small amount of published material exists on Preston Brooks. To the degree that Brooks is mentioned at all it is almost always within the context of his assault upon Sumner and to the exclusion of virtually every other aspect of his life. In an October 1978 article for the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Robert McNeil Mathis accurately assessed the lack of serious scholarship on Brooks:

few men of American history have been mentioned so prominently yet investigated so carelessly as Preston Smith Brooks. While the life of his antagonist, Charles Sumner, has been thoroughly scrutinized by several able biographers, Brooks has remained in the public mind an obscure and enigmatic individual. The image of Brooks which has generally endured in both popular and scholarly accounts is predominantly the identical one which appeared in Northern orations and publications at the time of his encounter with Sumner.⁸

As Mathis suggests, the lack of interest in Brooks primarily stems from the fact that while Charles Sumner is almost universally regarded as a hero, Preston Brooks is largely seen as a villain, an unthinking brute who savagely attacked a congressional colleague for no other reason than his having dared to speak out against the evils of Southern slavery.⁹

"Synopsis of Speech, on the 29th of August, 1856, at Columbia, South Carolina," in *The Political Text Book or Encyclopedia Containing Everything Necessary for the Reference of the Politicians and Statesmen of the United States*, edited by M. W. Cluskey (Philadelphia: James B. Smith & Co., 1860), 85; Donald, *Sumner*, 290–1.

⁸ Mathis, "Image," 296, 297.

⁹ As Mathis wrote, "Perhaps also the unsavory image of Brooks has discouraged interest in pursuing an adequate inquiry." Mathis, "Image," 297.

But whether one loves or despises him, there is no denying that Preston Brooks occupies an important place in the American story. The Caning of Sumner represents a pivotal event in antebellum American history, one that both inflamed sectional tensions and vastly accelerated the process of disunion. Furthermore, the attack was both inspired by and symbolic of the violence then raging in Kansas Territory, and on that basis alone strongly reflected the increasingly violent nature of antebellum American politics. Little wonder that historian Bruce Catton once characterized the Caning of Sumner as the first blow of the Civil War. As a principal actor in that event, Preston Brooks warrants a greater degree of historical scrutiny than he has heretofore been accorded.¹⁰

* * *

The reaction to the Caning at the time was both extreme and predictably sectional. Northerners vilified Brooks as a tool of the slaveholding oligarchy—a cowardly figure who had sneaked up behind Sumner and, taking advantage of his victim’s defenseless position, committed a brutal and barbarous attack on an unarmed man, continuing to land blows even after Sumner had collapsed on the floor.¹¹

Southerners argued just as fervently that Sumner had only gotten what he deserved. Rather than being an unprovoked act of barbarism, as Northerners claimed, the Caning was a just punishment for the public slandering of a revered Southern gentleman and public servant (i.e. Andrew Butler). Brooks, heretofore a virtual unknown outside of his native South Carolina, suddenly found himself hailed throughout the South as the hero of the hour. In communities across the South, public rallies were held to celebrate Brooks and his “chastisement” of Charles Sumner.¹²

¹⁰ Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 2, as quoted in Donald, *Sumner*, vii.

¹¹ The Northern press was particularly vicious in its condemnation of Brooks. Donald, *Sumner*, 310; “The Ruffians in the Senate,” *Albany (New York) Evening Journal*, May 23, 1856, from Furman, 1; “Ruffianism at Washington,” *Buffalo (New York) Morning Express*, May 24, 1856, from Furman, 2.

¹² “Sumner Caned by Col. Brooks,” Greenville (SC) *Patriot and Mountaineer*, May 29, 1856, from Furman, 1; also [No Title] Charleston *Mercury*, May 28, 1856, from Furman, 2; “Brooks and Sumner,” Spartanburg (SC) *Spartan*, May 29, 1856, from Furman, 2; “The Brooks Meeting,” Laurensville (SC) *Herald*, June 6, 1856, from Furman, 1; “Public Approval of Mr. Brooks,” Columbia (SC), *South Carolinian*, May 27, 1856, from Furman, 1; “The Caning of Sumner,” *Columbia South Carolinian*, May 28, 1856, p. 3; *Richmond Enquirer*, May 30, 1856; Donald,

These contemporary reactions continue to exert considerable influence over modern perceptions of Preston Brooks and his assault on Charles Sumner. But what seems to be lacking in these contrasting images is a sense of the man himself, who he was, where he came from, and most importantly what motivated him to commit the attack upon Sumner. To be sure, the Caning of Sumner, in addition to being one of the most important events of the antebellum period, was by far the best-documented event of Preston Brooks's life. But even so, there must be more to the man's story than this single ugly incident.

Indeed there is. Thirty-six years old at the time of the Caning, Brooks could already lay claim to an entire lifetime's worth of knowledge and experiences when he entered the Senate chamber on that fateful day in May 1856.¹³ As a central figure in what is widely regarded as a pivotal event in American history, Brooks's life experiences are significant not just for what they reveal about the man himself, but for the insights they provide into the events that led to the attack on Sumner and the entire process of disunion. As a biographical account of the life of Preston Brooks, which places particular emphasis upon Brooks's life before the Sumner Assault, this book seeks to address this historical oversight. In so doing it seeks not only to bring Preston Brooks out of the shadows of obscurity but to create a more objective approach to its subject, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of both Preston Brooks's character in general and the motives that drove him to attack Charles Sumner.

* * *

But while the book takes a fairly straightforward biographical approach, it does not simply restate, in chronological order, the specific events of Preston Brooks's life. Instead, the focus is placed on three key episodes, each of which represents not only a defining moment for Brooks himself but, more importantly, a key turning point in the history of the antebellum South.

The first of these episodes—the 1840 “Affair of Honor” between Preston Brooks and Louis T. Wigfall—while not being Brooks's first experience with the Code of Honor, nevertheless represented a watershed event in his life. The fact that the Wigfall Affair coincided with South Carolina's 1840 Gubernatorial Election lends it a significance that extends beyond issues of honor and reputation. The 1840 election was one of the

Sumner, 304–5; “A New Era,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 29, 1856, from Furman; Mathis, “Image,” 296, 297.

¹³ Mathis, “Image,” 296, 297.

most contentious in South Carolina's political history. The 1832 Nullification Crisis had left the State Democratic Party, which dominated South Carolina politics, bitterly divided into two factions: the majority Nullifiers, who promoted the candidacy of Edgefield planter James Hammond, and the Unionists who supported former Congressman John P. Richardson. As a firm supporter of both Nullification and Hammond, Brooks was drawn into a war of words with Wigfall who, despite being a nullificationist himself, had chosen to support Richardson. Beyond that, the 1840 election also carried great personal significance for Brooks in that it marked his initial foray into public life. But most significant of all, at least from the perspective of this study, the "Wigfall Affair" represented the sole occasion on which Preston Brooks actually took part in a duel.¹⁴

The book's second focal point examines Preston Brooks's military service during the US War with Mexico. The Mexican War was a violently transformative event, for both the United States as a whole and the men who fought in it. Just as the Mexican War changed the nature of American politics, transforming it from a debate over issues such as internal improvements and westward expansion into a bitter fight over slavery and states' rights, it also altered the course of Brooks's life from relative obscurity toward national political prominence (at least for a time), and ultimately toward the encounter with Sumner.

As might be expected, the Caning of Sumner not only represents the last of the book's focal points, but is, for what should be obvious reasons, in many ways the most important of the episodes under consideration. In addition to being one of the most notorious incidents of the entire nineteenth century, the Caning of Sumner was, without a doubt, the most significant event of Preston Brooks's life, having transformed him, literally overnight, from a third-rate congressman into a household name. It is no exaggeration to state that, if not for his attack on Charles Sumner, history would have taken little note of Preston Brooks. For that reason alone, no account of his life would be complete that did not include at least some mention of the Caning incident.

This book, by examining the life of Preston Brooks in its entirety, seeks to not only tell his story in full but gain a deeper understanding both of his character in general and specifically the motives for his attack on Charles Sumner. By placing these events within the proper context of

¹⁴ Louis T. Wigfall to John Manning, July 27, 1839, January 17, 1840, February 22, 1840, Williams-Chestnut-Manning Collection (W-C-M) original in possession of the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (hereafter SCL); C.W. Lord, "Young Louis Wigfall, South Carolina Politician and Duelist," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 59, no. 2 (April, 1958): 99-100.

Brooks's life experiences, the book will provide a unique perspective on not only the Caning itself but the sectional conflict as a whole, at least as it was experienced by one South Carolina congressman.

PART ONE:

[1819-1841]

CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS (1819–39)

Even among his contemporaries, Preston Brooks was always something of an enigma. To some he was the very model of a dedicated Christian family man, always ready to defend his honor, his family, and his most sacred beliefs; others, who perhaps recalled his service in the Mexican War, saw him as an armchair warrior who talked a good fight but all too often shied away from actual physical confrontation. Some thought him mentally unbalanced, while for others he represented the perfect embodiment of masculine self-restraint, whose only crime was to have acted out of a deeply felt sense of honor to redress a personal wrong committed against an ill-treated and aged kinsman. Among his congressional colleagues, opinion seems to have been split between those who saw him as a tireless defender of Southern rights and those who regarded him as a bully and a coward who was too timid to challenge an opponent directly, preferring to rely on stealth and duplicity. His political foes, to the extent that they gave him any thought at all, considered him an object of contempt, the product of a brutal and oppressive system whose baser instincts had driven him to commit a monstrous crime against a congressional colleague for no other reason than having voiced his opinion.

Unfortunately, the past few decades have done little to clarify matters. Today, unlike his more celebrated antagonist Charles Sumner, Preston Brooks is largely unknown to the general public. To the extent that Brooks is remembered at all, it is almost always in connection with his assault on Sumner, an act that continues to define Brooks in the public mind. The lack of interest in Brooks as a subject of historical inquiry is largely attributable to Brooks's unsavory reputation. A second, perhaps more important, factor concerns the relative lack of credible information regarding his life and career. Primary source materials are at best fragmentary and scattered; even secondary sources are hard to come by and not always reliable, and many simply repeat erroneous information gleaned from other secondary sources. While the advent of electronic media and the internet has greatly facilitated the accessing of information, the fact remains that there is much of Brooks's life story that remains frustratingly just beyond the historian's grasp.

This lack of reliable source material is especially acute in regard to Brooks's early years. Simply stated, the first fifteen years of his life are an almost completely blank slate. Indeed, even the specifics of his birth are matters of some dispute (South Carolina did not require the issuance of birth or death certificates until well into the early twentieth century). What is known, or at least what can be stated with some degree of certainty, is that Preston Brooks was born on August 6, 1819 near the village of Edgefield Court House, South Carolina (today called simply Edgefield), at that time a town of fewer than three hundred residents. Edgefield's population, while small, was still enough to rank it as the largest community in what was then designated as the Edgefield District of South Carolina.¹

¹ First settled around 1748, Edgefield District separated from the Old Ninety-Six Legislative District shortly after the American War of Independence. Edgefield District has since been divided several times into modern Edgefield, Saluda, and parts of Greenwood, McCormick, and Aiken counties. At the time of Brooks's birth, Edgefield District contained a population of approximately 25,119 inhabitants, 12,864 of whom were white and 12,255 black, the latter nearly all slaves. By the time of the Civil War, blacks would outnumber whites 24,233 to 15,653. Apart from Edgefield Court House, the district's only other incorporated town was Hamburg (modern North Augusta), a once thriving market center located on the Savannah River. See "Hon. Preston S. Brooks-Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks, and Proceedings of Congress on the occasion of his death," *Southern Quarterly Review* 2, no. 2 (February 1857): 349, accessed through the Making of America website, University of Michigan, <http://www.hti.umich.edu/t/text/gjfcvtdir/acp1141.3-02.002/03480348.tifs.gif>(hereafter "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks"); McKnight, "Preston Brooks," 288–9; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 628; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 36; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, 25; Chapman, *History of Edgefield County*, 11–17; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben*, 24–5; Mathis, "Image," 296, 297; Robert L. Meriwether, *The Expansion of South Carolina, 1729–1765* (Kingsport, TN.: Southern Publishers, 1940), I, 66–72, 117–35, 160–2, 251–7, 260–1; David D. Wallace, *The History of South Carolina* (New York: American Historical Society, 1934), 23; Julian J. Petty, *The Growth and Distribution of Population in South Carolina*, Bulletin no. 11, prepared for South Carolina State Planning Board (Columbia, SC: State Council for Defense Industrial Development Committee, July 1943), 3–21, 35, 40; William W. Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: the Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816–1836* (New York: Harper & Row: 1965), 7–24, esp. 7, 17–19; South Carolina Dept. of Agriculture, Commerce and Immigration, *Handbook of South Carolina*, 66–74, esp. 68 and 77–139, 176, 511, 513, 527, 528, cited in Burton, 4; An excellent description of Edgefield, past and present, is provided in Bland and Rainsford, *Revitalization Study*, cited in Burton, 29; US Bureau of the

* * *

Brooks's point of origin, Edgefield Court House, was a community of disproportionate influence whose citizens were immensely proud of both their town and the prominent role that it had played, and few doubted would continue to play, in state and national political affairs. More than anything, the people of Edgefield took special pride in a tradition of social and political leadership that they believed, with good reason, few American towns could match. This was no idle boast. In truth, few American communities of any size can claim to have produced as many noteworthy public figures as Edgefield, South Carolina, one observer noting that the community, "has had more dashing, brilliant, romantic figures, statesmen, orators, soldiers, adventurers, daredevils, than any county of South Carolina, if not of any rural county in America."²

If he exaggerates, it isn't by much. The list of prominent individuals who have at one time or another called Edgefield home is indeed impressive. During the nineteenth century alone, the district produced no fewer than ten of South Carolina's governors, two United States Senators, and countless congressional representatives and state-level politicians. Furthermore, the fact that, almost to a man, Edgefield's political class belonged to that most extreme radical faction of Southern "fireeaters" only served to further enhance Edgefield's inflated sense of self-worth.³

Census, 8th (1860) Census, vol. 1, *Population*, pp.449–52; Wallace, *History of South Carolina*, 3,304, cited in Burton, 19.

² William Watts Ball, *The State That Forgot: South Carolina's Surrender to Democracy*(Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1932), 22; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 4, 14, 15; see also Meriwether, *Expansion of South Carolina*; Petty, *Growth and Distribution of Population*, 511, 513; Chapman, *History of Edgefield*, 11–17; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 28, 33, 34, 35, 40, 47, 48.

³ As Fox Butterfield has written, "During the nineteenth century, these governors and senators, as well as a flock of congressmen from Edgefield, served as key participants at every crucial juncture in South Carolina's radical history. They were ardent advocates of nullification, declaring the tariff of 1828 illegal and proposing to use force against the federal government. In 1860, they helped lead South Carolina and then the South into the Civil War." A partial list of Edgefield's political elite includes: George McDuffie, who served South Carolina as a congressman, senator, and governor; former congressman and lieutenant governor Eldred Simkins; Governor Andrew Pickens and his son Francis W. Pickens, who as South Carolina's secession governor led the state out of the Union in 1860; US Senator Andrew Pickens Butler and his brother Pierce Mason Butler, the latter of whom served both as governor and commander of South Carolina's First Volunteer Mexican War regiment; James Henry Hammond, who served both as

Along with this tradition of political leadership, Edgefield Court House was a community with a notorious reputation for violence and mayhem. That violence in Edgefield should be so rampant is hardly surprising given the level of violence that generally prevailed throughout nineteenth-century American society, and especially in the South. Historians of the Old South have long noted the region's strong propensity for violent conflict.⁴ As Jack K. Williams makes clear in *Dueling in the Old South*:

governor and as a US Senator; in addition to US Senators, Lewis T. Wigfall, "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, and more recently J. Strom Thurmond, famed Alamo defenders James Butler Bonham, and William Barrett Travis also hailed from Edgefield District, as did Confederate General James Longstreet. See Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16, 25; "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks," 349; McKnight, "Preston Brooks," 288–9; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 628; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 21, 46; Edwin Luther Green, *George McDuffie* (Columbia, SC: State Company, 1936), 17–18; Ball, *The State That Forgot*, 22; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben*, 24–5; Chapman, *History of Edgefield*, 11–17.

⁴ According to Christopher Olsen, in 1880 Horace Redfield's calculation of homicide rates in the antebellum and post-bellum North and South found murder to be ten times as likely in Dixie. (His figures do not include assaults against slaves, only incidents between whites.) See *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi: Masculinity, Honor, and the Antiparty Tradition, 1830–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171; Own by, *Subduing Satan*, 13–6, 62, 78–81; Etcheson, "Manliness," 61; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 352–61, 370; Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1968), 28–40; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14; Clement Eaton, *The Mind of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 233; Data from Horace V. Redfield, *Homicide, North and South: Being a Comparative View of Crime Against the Person in Several Parts of the United States* (Philadelphia: 1880); Jack K. Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 75, 76; McKnight, "Preston Brooks," 288–9; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 625, 628; Mathis, "Image," 299, 300; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 20, 46, 72–3, 75, 91; Williams, *Vogues in Villainy*, 37; Brown, *Strain of Violence*, 71–90; *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, part 2 (Washington, DC: US Bureau of the Census, 1975), 414; Edward McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution* (New York: The McMillian Company, 1901), 144–5; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 12, 18; see also John Belton O'Neill, *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina*, vol. 1 (Charleston: S.G. Courtenay & Co., 1859), 36; The notion that Edgefield bred a "syndrome of violence and extremism," strong even for South Carolina, is asserted most clearly

Vignettes of Social History, only the specific forms of violence varied from class to class, with poor whites favoring “brawling in the streets or at taverns or feuding at militia musters ‘cursing biting . . . [and] jumping upon a stump and crowing like a cock.’”

For the gentleman class there was the hunt (after the fox, over the meanest terrain, personal danger of no concern), the ring tournament . . . the riding of the night patrol to frustrate crimes and slave escapes, perhaps to nip a black rebellion in the bud—and, above all else, there was the duel, the bloody code, the going to the iron man.⁵

Yet, even by these standards, the violence in Edgefield was excessive and included everything from simple fistfights to public floggings, abductions, and even murder. Duels were frequent and often deadly. To cite one of many examples, future Texas Senator (and Edgefield native) Lewis T. Wigfall is known to have fought at least two—and possibly as many as eight—duels during his life (including one against Brooks), and to have come close on three other occasions. Little wonder, then, that throughout much of its history, the community has often been tagged with the epithet of “Bloody Edgefield.”⁶

in Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

⁵ Williams, *Dueling in the Old South*, 76.

⁶ Examples abound of the bloodthirstiness of Edgefield residents. An incident of the following July of 1851 represents but one of the more notorious such episodes that have been recounted over the years. The incident in question, which took place in the barroom of Edgefield’s Spann Hotel, began when an individual named Philip Goode, suddenly and for no apparent reason, accused another local squire named William Cloud of having claimed that he could “whip Goode” in a fight. Cloud denied ever having made such a statement, which led Goode to label him “a damn liar.” Rising to his feet, Goode then grabbed Cloud by the coat collar and shot him in the chest, firing from such close range that Cloud’s coat caught fire, killing him instantly. Witnesses later stated that Goode then stood over Cloud’s body and shouted, “God damn you, that will satisfy you,” before firing two more shots into Cloud’s lifeless body. Edgefield’s belligerent reputation does not rest solely on anecdotal evidence, and at least some statistical evidence exists to suggest that Edgefield did indeed merit its bloody reputation. According to FBI Uniform Crime Reports, County Coroners’ reports of Juries of Inquest, 1844–1858, Edgefield Coroners’ Juries of Inquest, officially recorded sixty-five murders in the district (which was probably a low count), which works out to a shocking annual rate of “18 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.” See Chapman, *History of Edgefield*, 174; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16; McKnight, “Preston Brooks,” 288–9; Barney, “Brooks, Preston Smith,” 625, 628; Mathis, “Image,” 299, 300; Burton, *In My Father’s House*, 14, 20, 46,

It was into this community of street brawlers and duelists that Preston Smith Brooks was born, part of an extensive kinship network that included some of the antebellum South's most prominent families. His father, Whitfield Butler Brooks Sr., was a successful planter and prominent member of the local slave-owning elite, perhaps best remembered for his years of service as Commissioner in Equity for the Edgefield District.⁷ A native of neighboring Newberry District, Whitfield Brooks was born on

72–3, 75, 91; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben*, 24, 25, 31, 32; King, *Louis T. Wigfall*, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35; Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villainy*, 37; Brooks, *South Carolina Bench and Bar*, vol. 1, 199; See also McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution, 1775–1780*; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 2, 12, 18; O'Neill, *Biographical Sketches*, vol. 1, 36; FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 8; William Francis Guess, *South Carolina: Annals of Pride and Protest* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 229; "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks," 349; Eaton, *Mind of the Old South*, 233; Own by, *Subduing Satan*, 11, 12, 15, 24, 34, 44–6, 49, 81, 129; Michael Stephen Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767–1878* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 63–5; Parson Mason L. Weems, *The Devil in Petticoats, or God's Revenge Against Husband Killing* (Charleston: privately printed, 1823); Edgefield Coroners' Inquest Reports, July 8, 1851, South Carolina Archives.

⁷ "Whitfield Brooks Obituary," *Edgefield Advertiser*, January 22, 1852, 2 (hereafter "Whitfield Brooks Obituary"); O'Neill, "Whitfield Brooks" *Biographical sketches*, 473, 474; "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks," 348–9; McKnight, "Preston Brooks," 288–9; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 625, 628; Laurence A. Keitt, "Eulogy of Preston S. Brooks," *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, Third Session, Thursday, January 29, 1857, in The Library of Congress, *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774–1875*, 501 (hereafter "Keitt Eulogy"); Glenna Whiteaker Wilding (As told by SR. Mary Samuel Carter, OSU), *River of Years: Genealogy and Narrative History of the Brooks-Carter Family of South Carolina* (Tangent Enterprises, 1994), 36–7; *Edgefield Advertiser*, October 5, 1842, 2; "Democratic Meeting," *Edgefield Advertiser*, May 3, 1843; "Hon. F.W. Pickens," *Edgefield Advertiser*, July 20, 1842, 2; *Edgefield Advertiser*, October 26, 1842, 2; November 30, 1842, 2; November 30, 1842, 2; Piney Woods, "For the Advertiser," *Edgefield Advertiser*, January 18, 1843, 2; "Extract of a letter received by a gentleman of this village, from a friend in Newberry District," *Edgefield Advertiser*, February 8, 1843, 3; "Ourself," *Edgefield Advertiser*, March 15, 1843, 2; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 10; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 46; Chapman, *History of Edgefield*, 11–17; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben*, 24–5; Mathis, "Image," 296, 297. Genealogical information accessed through the Brooks family genealogical website, The Brooks Historian, Home of the Brooks Genealogy, Historical Archive, and Reference Library, <http://brooks-historian.org/bbrooks/public.html> (hereafter Brooks Historian).

February 3, 1790. Soon after Whitfield's birth, the family relocated to a location near the community of Big Creek, South Carolina, at that time part of Edgefield District but now located on the northern edge of Saluda County.⁸

Whitfield began his education at what was called an "old field school." Admittedly primitive, these "schools" offered little in the way of mental stimulation, but Whitfield did manage to acquire a rudimentary knowledge of arithmetic as well as "the art of writing an excellent hand." Beginning around age fifteen or sixteen, Whitfield attended classes at Mount Bethel Academy. After graduating from Mount Bethel (probably in 1808), Whitfield spent a year working in the office of his uncle, Stanmore Butler, who at the time held the position of Edgefield Town Clerk. To prepare for college, and to make up for the deficiencies in his "field school" education, Whitfield spent about a year studying at the famed Moses Waddel Academy near Willington, South Carolina.⁹

In 1810, Whitfield Brooks entered South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina) where his classmates included Charleston *Mercury* founder Henry L. Pinckney, Charles Pinckney, a future congressman whose father was a signer of the United States Constitution, noted jurist John Belton O'Neale, and future US Senator William C. Preston. After graduating with honors in 1812, his scholarship being good enough to earn him "one of the appointments to speak at the graduating exhibition," Whitfield Brooks took up the study of law and later read in the office of Colonel Eldred Simkins.¹⁰

Admitted to the bar in 1815, Whitfield was elected by the state legislature to serve as Edgefield's Commissioner in Equity, a position he held for the next eighteen years until poor health forced him to resign.

⁸ Three more children would follow, all of them girls: Lucinda Brooks (born 1791); Behethland Brooks (born 1793), Nancy Brooks (born 1798), and Eliza Brooks (born 1799). Whitfield's mother, Elizabeth Butler Brooks, died of unknown causes around 1802, after which Whitfield and his three sisters were cared for by a "neighboring aunt." Several less-than-reliable sources state that Whitfield may have had two additional siblings: a sister, Lucretia Brooks, and a brother, William B. Brooks. See O'Neill, "Whitfield Brooks," *Biographical Sketches*, 473; "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks," 349; McKnight, "Preston Brooks," 288–9; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 628; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 36; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 15, 16, 25; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben*, 24–5; Mathis, "Image," 296, 297; Whitfield Brooks Obituary; *Edgefield Advertiser*, April 19, 1848, 3.

⁹ Whitfield Brooks Obituary.

¹⁰ Whitfield may have also attended Litchfield School of Law in 1814. Whitfield Brooks Obituary; See O'Neill, "Whitfield Brooks," *Biographical Sketches*, 473.

After his retirement, Whitfield went into private law practice, first partnering with a relative, Major George Butler, for about four years, then forming a partnership with Francis Hugh Wardlaw. Whitfield Brooks may have also served a term in the South Carolina legislature.¹¹

On June 16, 1818, Whitfield married Mary Parsons Carroll, whose family ranked high among Charleston's planter elite. The marriage was apparently a happy one, or at least fruitful, producing at least five children—in addition to Preston they included James Carroll Brooks (born 1820 or 1821), Ellen Sophia Brooks (born ca. 1820), John Hampden Brooks (probably born 1823), and Whitfield Butler Brooks (also called Whitfield Brooks Jr. and probably born in 1825).¹²

* * *

In addition to growing up in the toxic environment of Edgefield Village, Preston Brooks could also claim an extremely impressive

¹¹ “Whitfield Brooks Obituary”; O’Neill, “Whitfield Brooks,” *Biographical Sketches*, 473, 474; “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 348–9; McKnight, “Preston Brooks,” 288–9; Barney, “Brooks, Preston Smith,” 625, 628; “Keitt Eulogy,” 501; Wilding, *River of Years*, 36–7; *Edgefield Advertiser*, October 5, 1842, 2; Whitfield Brooks Obituary; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 10; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 46; Genealogical information accessed through the Brooks family genealogical website, Brooks Historian.

¹² Here again we face the problem of indeterminate birth dates. In the case of Preston Brooks's siblings, the *Edgefield Advertiser* in its obituary specifically states that Whitfield and Mary Parsons Carroll Brooks “had by the marriage eight children, four of whom are now alive; Three died in infancy and another the gallant Whitfield Butler Brooks, died of wounds received in the bloody battle of Churubusco.” The identities of the three siblings who died in infancy are almost impossible to establish with certainty. According to one, not-very-credible source, Brooks had a sister named Nancy, but as she is not noted anywhere else the claim cannot be accepted at face value. Other similar sources list his brother Whitfield as having been born in 1817 or sometime “between 1813 and 1840.” In his profile of Whitfield Brooks Sr. written for his *Biographical Sketches of the Bench and Bar of South Carolina*, John Belton O’Neill lists the young Whitfield as being twenty-two years old at the time of his death in 1847, which would make his year of birth, 1825. Since O’Neill was acquainted with the Brooks family, his date of 1825 must be accepted as accurate. This same problem of irregular birth records will arise again when discussing Brooks's own children. See Whitfield Brooks Obituary; O’Neill, “Whitfield Brooks,” *Biographical Sketches*, 473, 474; “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 348–9; McKnight, “Preston Brooks,” 288–9; Barney, “Brooks, Preston Smith,” 625; Eulogy of Preston S. Brooks, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, Third Session, Wednesday, January 29, 1857, 500.

pedigree. His paternal grandfather Zachariah Smith Brooks was remembered as a hero of the American Revolution and an “eminently successful” planter whom contemporaries described as “frank and ardent in his nature ... sincere and devoted in his friendship, and ... warm and affectionate” in his domestic relations. These qualities, combined with his “high principles ... unostentatious but sterling worth, and ... strong, manliness of character,” had made Zachariah Brooks a prominent leader within his native Newberry, South Carolina. After moving his family to the Big Creek region of Edgefield District, Zachariah Brooks continued to play a leading role in local affairs, even recruiting “a fine volunteer troop of which he was elected Captain.”¹³

While these were all valuable assets, Zachariah’s most significant advantage in life may have been his marriage into the Butler clan, which traced its origins back to the earliest colonial period, and even claimed ties to British nobility.¹⁴ To those who knew them, and especially to themselves, the Butlers were the living embodiment of the South’s self-professed cavalier tradition. By the early nineteenth century, the family had amassed an enviable record of achievement, having produced countless military and political leaders.¹⁵ The Butlers were among the earliest families to settle in what would eventually become Edgefield District, as well as one of the first to acquire African slaves. The family patriarch, James Butler Sr., together with his wife, two sisters, and eight children, settled at Mount Willing on the Saluda River sometime during the 1760s.¹⁶ James Butler later served with distinction in the American

¹³ Zachariah would command the troop for many years, until finally being appointed colonel of a regiment of cavalry. See O’Neill, “Whitfield Brooks,” *Biographical Sketches*, 473; “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 349; McKnight, “Preston Brooks,” 288–9; Barney, “Brooks, Preston Smith,” 625, 628; “Keitt Eulogy,” 501; Wilding, *River of Years*, 36–7; Burton, *In My Father’s House*, 14, 36; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 10, 15, 16, 25; Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben*, 24–5; Mathis, “Image,” 296, 297; “[Zachariah Smith Brooks] Obituary,” *Edgefield Advertiser*, April 19, 1848, 3.

¹⁴ The Butlers claimed descent from three English Barons: Henry de Bohun (1176–1220), Saire de Quincy (ca. 1155–1219), and William Malef (d. 1217). “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 349.

¹⁵ The first to arrive was James Butler Sr., a Scots-Irish immigrant, who settled, along with his wife, two sisters, and eight children, at Mount Willing on the Saluda River during the 1760s, having come from Pennsylvania by way of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. See McCrady, *History of South Carolina*, 467–75; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 4, 5.

¹⁶ See McCrady, *History of South Carolina*, 467–75; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 4, 5.

War of Independence, rising to the rank of captain before being killed, together with his son James Butler Jr., by a band of Tory partisans under William “Bloody Bill” Cunningham at the Cloud’s Creek Massacre in November, 1781. An elder son, William Butler, managed to escape the carnage at Cloud’s Creek, but also rendered meritorious service to the patriot cause, and was eventually promoted to the rank of general.¹⁷

One of William Butler’s most loyal friends, and a fellow Revolutionary War veteran, was Zachariah Brooks, the two having served together late in the war under Colonel Samuel Hammond.¹⁸ After the war, the ties between the two men were further bolstered when Zachariah Brooks married Butler’s younger sister Elizabeth. Significantly, General

¹⁷ O’Neill, “Whitfield Brooks,” *Biographical Sketches*, 473, 474; “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 348–9; McKnight, “Preston Brooks,” 288–9; Barney, “Brooks, Preston Smith,” 625, 628; “Keitt Eulogy,” 501; Wilding, *River of Years*, 36–7; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 10; Burton, *In My Father’s House*, 14, 46; Genealogical information accessed through the Brooks family genealogical website, Brooks Historian; McCrady, *History of South Carolina*, 467–75; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 4, 5, 15.

¹⁸ Perhaps Zachariah’s most memorable wartime experience occurred during Colonel Hammond’s pursuit of “Bloody Bill” Cunningham following the latter’s “murderous and ferocious incursions into the limits of 96 District,” during which Cunningham, at the head of a mounted force that varied in strength from 155 to 300 men, “ravaged the country as high up as the present district of Newberry.” Hammond, whose own small cavalry force numbered about fifty men, finally caught up with Cunningham “near the intersection of little and big Saluda river.” At first, Hammond having apparently caught Cunningham, who was still trying to get the last of his men across the river, somewhat unawares at first prepared to attack, but then quickly begged off, citing the unfavorable tactical situation combined with the great disparity in numbers. However, Captain Richard Johnson was not willing to give up so easily. Johnson, one of Hammond’s most trusted lieutenants, judge the situation differently having observed that most of Cunningham’s troops had already crossed the river and dismounted, and were then in “the act of preparing their food.” Johnson then received permission to ask for volunteers willing to “face the danger, and attack the enemy before he could have time to form his men in their present disarray.” Among the first to volunteer was sixteen-year-old Zachariah Brooks, who blithely dismissed Johnson’s protests that he was too young for such a hazardous undertaking by assuring the Captain that “I can go where you can.” Also among the first to volunteer was William Butler, no doubt eager to avenge the murder of his brother and father at Cunningham’s hands at Cloud’s Creek, a few weeks earlier. Johnson was later elected to the South Carolina legislature. “Revolutionary Incident,” *Edgefield Advertiser*, December 23, 1846, 3; “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 349; McCrady, *The History of South Carolina*, 470–5; Chapman, *History of Edgefield*, 30–71; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 6; *Edgefield Advertiser*, April 19, 1848, 3.

Butler, in addition to being Elizabeth Butler's elder brother, was also the father of Senator Andrew Pickens Butler, whose crude verbal assault at the hands of Charles Sumner later provoked Preston Brooks to commit his act of retribution. Another son, Pierce Mason Butler, would serve as South Carolina's governor and later, during the Mexican War, commanded the South Carolina Volunteers until he was killed at the battle of Churubusco. Perhaps the most noteworthy of Preston Brooks's Butler kin was the famed Alamo defender, James Butler Bonham, whose grandmother, Sarah Butler Smith, was the younger sister of the family patriarch, James Butler Sr.¹⁹

As a member of the South Carolina planter elite, and having descended from such an esteemed lineage, Preston Brooks grew up being constantly reminded of his elite status and the obligations that came with it. Indeed, the image of his cousin James Bonham facing down hordes of Mexican soldiers at the Alamo, alongside such legendary figures as David Crockett and Jim Bowie, must have made a powerful impression on young Brooks. The fact that Bonham (along with Crockett and Bowie) had made the ultimate sacrifice by giving his life for the South would have left no doubt in young Preston's mind as to what was expected of him as a Southern gentleman. And while details regarding Brooks's early life remain sparse, it seems clear from what is known of him that he not only understood those expectations but actively strove to meet them and project the image of an aggressive, commanding, Southern male.²⁰

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But of all the influences that shaped young Brooks's character, none resonated more than that of his father, Whitfield Brooks Sr. Though never afforded the same chance for military glory as his older relatives, by all

¹⁹ O'Neill, "Whitfield Brooks," *Biographical Sketches*, 473, 474; "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks," 348–9; McKnight, "Preston Brooks," 288–9; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 625, 628; "Keitt Eulogy," 501; Wilding, *River of Years*, 36–7; Butterfield, *All God's Children*, 10; Burton, *In My Father's House*, 14, 46; Genealogical information accessed through the Brooks family genealogical website, Brooks Historian.

²⁰ John Fraser, *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 12; Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *Patrician and Plebeian in Virginia or the Origin and Development of the Social Classes of the Old Dominion* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1959), 1, 7; Michal J. Rozbicki, *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 12, 16, 37, 59; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 626.

accounts Whitfield Brooks was a remarkable man in his own right. His college classmate, John Belton O’Neill, once described Whitfield as “a man of science, of liberal education, and polished manners,” an assessment that the record of Whitfield’s professional career fully bears out. Whitfield won praise from many for his performance as Commissioner in Equity, including the Edgefield *Advertiser* which, in its eulogy, wrote: “He labored with diligence and ruled with justice and ability.” The *Advertiser* was equally gracious in assessing Whitfield’s legal career, noting that: “His judgment as a Counselor was good; his professional attainments highly respectable; his attention to the duties of his profession were assiduous, and his industry untiring.”²¹

In addition to his professional obligations, Whitfield Brooks also served in numerous civic and public service organizations. He was an enthusiastic supporter of internal improvements and took an active role in the Southern commercial and agricultural convention movements. More than anything else, Whitfield Brooks was a deeply religious man and a devoted member of the Edgefield Episcopal Church. He also served as an 1843 delegate to the Annual Meeting of the Union Bible Society of Edgefield and Abbeville, South Carolina.²²

And while certain details remain elusive, there is little doubt that Whitfield Brooks, more than any other single individual, profoundly influenced his son Preston’s character and values. Preston himself later described his father in the most glowing terms, calling him “an upright, virtuous, man,” and further noted that, “A kinder parent never lived nor a juster man than Whitfield Brooks.”²³ Indeed, so great was Whitfield’s

²¹ The Edgefield *Advertiser*, in its obituary of Whitfield Brooks, summarized his tenure as Commissioner in Equity as follows: “In the management and disbursement of money, Mr. B. was an example of all admiration and imitation.” Whitfield Brooks Obituary; O’Neill, “Whitfield Brooks,” *Biographical Sketches*, 473, 474; “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 348–9; McKnight, “Preston Brooks,” 288–9; Barney, “Brooks, Preston Smith,” 625, 628; “Keitt Eulogy,” 501; Wilding, *River of Years*, 36–7; Edgefield *Advertiser*, October 5, 1842, 2; Butterfield, *All God’s Children*, 10; Burton, *In My Father’s House*, 14, 46; Genealogical information accessed through the Brooks family genealogical website, Brooks Historian.

²² “For the Advertiser,” Edgefield *Advertiser*, October 25, 1843, 3; Whitfield Brooks Obituary.

²³ “For the Advertiser,” Edgefield *Advertiser*, October 25, 1843, 3; Whitfield Brooks Obituary; McKnight, “Preston Brooks,” 288–9; Barney, “Brooks, Preston Smith,” 625; “Keitt Eulogy,” 501; Eulogy of Preston S. Brooks, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, Third Session, Wednesday, January 29, 1857; “Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks,” 349; “Extracts from the diary of my husband

influence on his son that Preston Brooks would continue to emulate his father's "upright, virtuous" conduct throughout his life, and even into adulthood.²⁴

Perhaps the most important way in which Whitfield Brooks influenced not only Preston but all of his children was the strong emphasis he placed on education. Like his father, Preston Brooks was reasonably well educated, at least by nineteenth-century standards, which of course were a far cry from modern educational standards, especially in the South where public education, as that term is understood today, did not exist. Those parents who could afford to do so sent their children to private academies. When no private academy was available, a private tutor might be hired, or parents would resort to more informal arrangements such as neighborhood or "field schools." And while Whitfield Brooks had been forced to endure the indifferent standards that often typified field schools, Preston Brooks would attend some of the South's best private academies. But, more importantly, his educational experiences provide the first real glimpse into Preston Brooks's life story.²⁵

Preston's educational career probably began around 1825 at a local public school in Edgefield. Exactly how much time Brooks spent at public school is unclear, but it was probably brief. Like his father, Preston received most of his early education at the Moses Waddel Academy. Located just outside the small community of Willington, South Carolina, "amid the cane-breaks and piney woods," Waddel's academy had been founded in 1804 as a sort of frontier preparatory school. The majority of its students, Brooks included, were there to prepare themselves for the rigors of higher education, preferably at South Carolina College or, in a few cases, at some Northern school such as Harvard or Princeton.²⁶ The school's setting could not have been more rustic. Classes were literally held in a "log cabin of rooms," in which students were instructed in grammar, history, and geography, but "most of the time was spent on

(Preston S. Brooks) for the children" Martha C. Brooks (hereafter "Preston Diary"), undated entry, December 28, 1851.

²⁴ McKnight, "Preston Brooks," 288–9; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 625; "Keitt Eulogy," 501; Eulogy of Preston S. Brooks, *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, Third Session, Wednesday, January 29, 1857; "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks," 349; "Preston Diary," undated entry, December 28, 1851.

²⁵ "Speeches of the Honorable Preston S. Brooks," 349; Barney, "Brooks, Preston Smith," 625.

²⁶ Robert S. McCully, "Moses Waddel, Pioneer Pedagogue," *South Carolina History Illustrated* 1, no. 1 (February 1976).