

1861. New York City Merchants Demand Compromise with the South

Source: L. C. Chittenden, Proceedings of the Peace Convention. P. 43, in Philip S. Foner, Business & Slavery, The New York Merchants & the Irrepressible Conflict. New York/Russell & Russell.

A. Dodge claimed to represent the merchants of New York City- a “body of men...who have a deep and abiding interest in the happiness and prosperity of the country and in the preservation of the Union.” According to the Journal of Commerce, February 21, 1861, Dodge’s appeal was acclaimed by businessmen throughout the North.

“I speak to you now as a business man- as a merchant of New York, the commercial metropolis of the nation. I am no politician. I have no interest except such as is common to the people. But let me assure you that even I can scarcely realize, much less describe the stagnation which has now settled upon the business and commerce of that great city, caused solely by the unsettled and uncertain conditions of the questions which we are endeavoring to arrange and settle here. . . . The merchants, in despair, are poring over their ledgers, checking off the names of their insolvent debtors, a new list of whom comes by each day’s mail. Their clerks sit around in idleness reading the newspapers or thinking mournfully of the wives and children at home who will go unclad and hungry if they are discharged from their places, as they know they must be, if this condition of things shall continue. All alike, employers and employed, with all dependent upon them, are looking anxiously and I wish I could say hopefully, to the Congress of the United State, or to this conference, as the only sources from which help may come. . . . I am a merchant. I am unused to the public discussions or arguments, but I am a businessman, and I take a business view on this subject. I can see clearly as I can see the sun at noon-day the causes of our present embarrassment. I believe I can see equally clear how those causes may be removed. . . . I am not here to argue or discuss constitutional questions. That duty belongs to gentlemen of the legal profession. I have lived under the Constitution. I venerate it and its authors as highly as any man here. But I do not venerate it so highly as to induce me to witness the destruction of the Government rather than see the Constitution amended or improved. I regret that the gentlemen composing the committee did not approach these questions more in the manner of merchants or commercial men. We would not have sacrificed our principles, but we would have agreed- have brought our minds as far as we could; we would have left open as few questions as possible. Those we would have arranged by mutual concessions. Mr. President, I speak as a merchant. I have a deep and abiding interest in my country and sorrow as I witness the dangers by which it is surrounded. But I am here for peace.”

B. John M. Brower, a leading shipping merchant, declared in an address before the New York Chamber of Commerce on March 31 (Source: Journal of Commerce, April 6, 1861):

“If the North and South are permanently divided, a conflict of tariffs must make a conflict of commercial interests detrimental to the interests of the commercial and agricultural interests of the North and the West. To avoid such conflict, the ports of the North should be opened to free trade.

If the Union is really gone, each state of the North will ere long begin to consult its own interests, before permanently binding itself to new systems....The City of New York, the fountain spring of the state in commercial and financial resources, with her free trade arms open to and in sympathy with the trade exchanges of the world at home and abroad, would enjoy for herself and her state, unbounded correspondences and prosperity. But fasten her to the restrictive policy of the North, with nearly two-thirds of the Atlantic and Gulf sea-coast and an equal portion of the exports cut off, and she would wither and decay. Can there be a doubt of her choice or that the state will maintain her in it. I think not.”