The Elijah Burritt Affair: David Walker's Appeal and Partisan Journalism in Antebellum Milledgeville

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The Elijah Burritt Affair: David Walker’s *Appeal* and Partisan Journalism in Antebellum Milledgeville

**BY GLENN M. MCNAIR**

In the winter of 1829 an obscure black Bostonian named David Walker shipped a pamphlet into the South—and the region was never the same. The pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and very Expressly, to those of the United States of America*, called for the nation’s slaves to rise up against their masters in divinely inspired violent revolution. This polemic was the first major salvo of the abolitionists’ war of words against the South’s principal institution.1 The *Appeal* caused a tremendous

1See Herbert Aptheker, *One Continual Cry, David Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829-1830* (New York, 1965). David Walker’s life is largely a mystery due to a relative dearth of source materials. The most thorough investigation of Walker’s background to date appears in Peter P. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, Pa., 1997). Walker was born to a free mother and enslaved father in Wilmington, N.C. in 1796 or 1797. He spent his early years in the Cape Fear area, where he was educated and introduced to Methodism. Between 1815 and 1820, the young Walker left Wilmington for Charleston, S.C. in pursuit of greater social and economic opportunity. Hinks speculates that Walker was in Charleston during Denmark Vesey’s aborted slave revolt. He left South Carolina, traveled around the South and West before settling in Boston in 1824. Once there, Walker enthusiastically involved himself in the abolitionist activities of black Boston, and aided in the founding of *Freedom’s Journal*, the first national African-American newspaper. Walker died in August 1830 at age thirty-three, less than a year after publication of the *Appeal*. It has been argued that Walker was murdered as a result of his abolitionist activities; the most interesting version of events has Walker meeting his end at the hands of Georgia bounty hunters sent to kill him for having sent the *Appeal* into their state. Hinks dismisses theories of Walker’s death that suggest foul play and concludes that Walker died of consumption, one of several pulmonary ailments plaguing the city in 1830, as did his daughter. I would like to thank Drs. James L. Roark, Leslie Harris, and Anthony G. Carey, and my colleagues Bobby Donaldson and Sylvia Coulibaly, for their thoughtful comments on previous drafts of this work.

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stir from Boston to New Orleans, and the southern reaction was immediate and drastic. Governors in Virginia and North Carolina convened secret legislative sessions to address the potential crisis, and Georgia hurriedly enacted laws on the last day of its legislative session to curb the potential effects of the dangerous document. These panic-inspired meetings resulted in two states passing laws that prohibited the circulation of insurrectionary literature (in Georgia such activity was made a capital offense), outlawed slave literacy, and forbade contact between northern black sailors and their free and enslaved southern brethren. In addition to governmental action, vigilance committees were formed and rewards offered for anyone caught circulating Walker’s work.

Scholars have viewed Georgia’s reaction as particularly severe. Walker’s Appeal created an atmosphere of hostility in which persons caught with the pamphlet found themselves vulnerable and nearly powerless to defend themselves against the potentially deadly accusations of their frightened neighbors. The case of Elijah Burritt is generally presented as evidence of the hysterical climate in Georgia. Burritt, a former New Englander, was editor of a newspaper at the state capital. On December 21, 1829, Burritt wrote to Walker and acquired several copies of the insurrectionary pamphlet because he wished to report on it; later it was alleged that he intended to circulate them in the slave community. Within days Burritt was arrested twice and finally forced to flee to New England in order to save his life, leaving his business and family behind.

Scholars writing on the affair have portrayed an innocent Burritt who was prosecuted and persecuted by paranoid southerners because he was a northerner with abolitionist sentiments. His family believed the same, and he even became a minor cause célèbre.

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4Elizabeth Cary Howard, “The Georgia Reaction to David Walker’s Appeal” (M.A. thesis, University of Georgia, 1967), iv, 62; Bobby Donaldson, “By Thy Words: David Walker’s Appeal Visits Georgia” (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of African-American Life and History, Charleston, S.C., October 1996). Both works provide excellent insight into the atmosphere in Georgia after the appearance of the Appeal.
for abolitionists in the North.\textsuperscript{4} In assessing the causes of violence directed against individuals with apparent abolitionist leanings, it appears safe to assume that these acts were perpetrated in response to the alleged abolitionism.\textsuperscript{3} But since anti-slavery was such a volatile social and political issue, its specter could be used to settle personal and partisan political scores and then effectively mask the self-interested nature of such vendettas.

The available evidence in the Elijah Burritt affair suggests that the editor was not run out of Georgia for his abolitionist beliefs or his association with David Walker. Careful examination of the events and personalities surrounding Burritt’s ouster reveals that it was the result of a campaign engineered by a small group of self-interested men who decided to take advantage of the fear of insurrection to secure Burritt’s newspaper to use as the principal propaganda organ for their political party. Viewed in this light, Walker’s \textit{Appeal} did not represent a threat to these men of the Old South but an opportunity. Given Elijah Burritt’s fate, scholars should consider personal and political motivations along with the more traditional explanations (racism, xenophobia, fear of insurrection, etc.) when investigating instances of abolition-related violence and persecution in order to avoid the pitfalls of over-generalization.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{4}William Lloyd Garrison was even interested in recruiting Burritt for the abolitionist cause. See Peter Tolis, \textit{Elihu Burritt: Crusader for Brotherhood} (Hamden, Conn., 1968), 8, 84-86. A letter received after Nat Turner’s revolt was received at Southampton, Va., which named Burritt in a large-scale conspiracy of whites, slaves and free blacks directed by a ubiquitous black genius known only as “The Chief.” The letter’s author, Nero, claimed that the conspiracy reached all levels of southern society and that it would result in the complete and utter destruction of the South in a violent slave revolution. No evidence of such a conspiracy has ever been uncovered. It appears that the letter was designed to add to the panic and hysteria created by the Turner revolt. See Ira Berlin, ed., “After Nat Turner: A Letter From the North” \textit{Journal of Negro History} 55 (April 1970): 144-51.

\textsuperscript{5}Clement Eaton, “Mob Violence in the Old South,” \textit{Mississippi Valley Historical Review} 29 (December 1942): 351-70. This article asserts that most mob violence was in response to anti-slavery; Eugene D. Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made} (New York, 1976), 50; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, \textit{Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South} (Oxford, Eng., 1982), 452-53; Merton L. Dillon, \textit{Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies, 1619-1865} (Baton Rouge, La., 1990), 177-78.

\textsuperscript{6}The caution that I urge on fellow scholars is not the product of greater wisdom or insight but, rather, of painful experience. In writing on the affair for my M.A. thesis, I too concluded that Burritt was the victim of anti-slavery paranoia. See Glenn Maurice McNair, “The Trials of Slaves in Baldwin County, Georgia, 1812-1858” (Georgia College & State University, 1996), 39-45. It was not until I learned that Burritt did not believe himself to be a victim of fear of anti-slavery but of partisan politics that I began to reconsider my own conclusions. This article is the result of that reflection, reappraisal and reinvestigation.
The Elijah Burritt affair took place in Milledgeville, Georgia, a city dominated by slavery and highly partisan politics. The years between 1815 and 1837 were the boom times for Georgia cotton production and planters did well, as did the towns associated with the cotton trade. By 1815, Milledgeville was the state capital and largest upcountry cotton market in the state (second only to Augusta), which meant considerable good fortune for the town after the mid-1820s when Georgia surpassed South Carolina to become the nation’s leading cotton producing state. As a town nurtured by cotton commerce, Milledgeville also found itself with a sizeable slave population. In 1828 the town claimed 1,599 inhabitants, 831 of them were whites, 20 were free persons of color, and the remaining 748 persons were slaves. Of the 167 families listed in the town census, 126 of them had slaves in their households. By 1830 the combined population of Milledgeville and surrounding Baldwin County was 7,250; slaves accounted for 56 percent of this total.

Like other societies nurtured by slavery, Baldwin County came to fear the violent rising up of those whom they held down—and with good reason. In the decades preceding the arrival of Walker’s Appeal, Baldwin County slaves had been convicted of a variety of thefts, assaults, attempted rapes and arsons against whites in the city and county. Just prior to the arrival of Walker’s Appeal there had been a number of mysterious fires in cities around the state and slaves were the suspected culprits. It could not have ever been far from the minds of the Baldwin County citizenry the carnage that would result if the slaves ever rose up en masse.

Piedmont lawyers and politicians loyal to rival multi-term governors George M. Troup and John Clark dominated the politics of antebellum Georgia. The Troup and Clark parties were not political parties as traditionally understood but were rather factions based largely on personal allegiance to the two governors. Animosity between the two groups was an outgrowth of rivalries between piedmont settlers after the Revolutionary War. The Troup

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2Bonner, Milledgeville, 113; Phillips, Historical Notes of Milledgeville, 3.

For a discussion of slave crime in Baldwin County see McNair, “The Trials of Slaves in Baldwin County”; Donaldson, “By Thy Words,” 10-13.
George M. Troup, who served as Georgia’s governor from 1823 to 1827, became the leader of the powerful political faction once led by James Jackson and William H. Crawford. Its rivalry with a faction led by former governor John Clark still dominated politics in Milledgeville and throughout the state when David Walker’s *Appeal* appeared in Georgia in 1829. *Portrait of Troup from the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.*

faction was initially composed of Virginia emigrants and was led at the turn of the century by Georgia governor, congressman and senator, James Jackson. When Jackson died in 1806 leadership of the faction passed to William H. Crawford and ultimately to Troup. The Jackson-Crawford-Troup faction was opposed by North Carolina emigrants led by John Clark, who was remembered as an “ill-mannered rowdy with the temper of a clansman who demanded that every man be for or against him” and “suffered no one of any consequence to occupy middle ground.”

There were very few social or economic differences between the Troup and Clark factions, but the Virginians tended to be slightly wealthier and had greater pretensions to distinguished ancestry than did the North Carolinians. There were also few differences between the factions politically. Both groups were made up of Jeffersonian Republicans. But given their slightly greater wealth the Troup faction could be thought of as representing the interests of the slaveholding planter aristocracy and larger, settled farmers,

while Clark and his followers were the voice of small farmers and frontiersmen. Factional lines were most obvious during gubernatorial elections, when state legislators chose the governor, and were solidified in contests between 1819 and 1825; Clark defeated Troup in 1819 and 1821 and Troup defeated Clarkite Matthew Talbot in 1823. The internecine warfare proved so troublesome that in 1824 the state constitution was amended to provide for popular election of the governor. Clark/Troup animosities reached their zenith in the gubernatorial election of 1825, which Troup won. The frontier counties supported Clark and the older, settled sections of the state supported Troup. One contemporary observer remembered that “the violence and virulence of party reached its acme, and pervaded every family, creating animosities which neither time nor reflection ever healed.” Throughout the early nineteenth century members of the two factions attempted to kill or injure each other in duels, fistfights and other forms of personal assault. Political infighting even divided families: one prominent husband and wife with eight children divorced over their political differences. While tempers had cooled a bit by 1829, factional loyalty was still the pivot around which Georgia politics turned.

Milledgeville’s newspaper editors were also forced to choose sides in this ongoing political feud. Politicians needed newspapers to publish their speeches and opinions, but more importantly, they needed editors willing to champion the party’s viewpoints and to attack those of the opposition. Editors were expected to seize every opportunity to cast the opposition in the “worst possible light.” Like politicians, editors practiced their craft knowing that they were exposing their characters, and perhaps even their bodies, to violent attack. These men were intelligent, fearless and industrious, but they would not hesitate to “sacrifice the reputation or prosperity of an individual” to advance the goals of their respective parties.

Newspapermen were not immune to the violence that was endemic to state politics. Editors fought duels against each other and were threatened and even beaten for their published views. In one

11Ibid., 16-17, 19-22; Bonner, Milledgeville, 52-54.
remarkable incident a Savannah newspaper was forced to close after its editor was clubbed and beaten by a mob.13 Elijah Burritt was well aware of the potentially deadly nature of newspaper editing in Georgia. In editorials and letters he explained that his life had been threatened on numerous occasions for the views he espoused in his paper.14 Some newspaper editors began to suspect that their fraternal infighting posed a threat to the freedom of speech, so in 1828 a convention was proposed to address and improve journalistic standards. It was never held due to a general lack of interest and newspapers continued to serve as partisan political organs.15 It was into this world of slavery, politics, violence and the press that David Walker hurled his incendiary command and plea to the slaves of Georgia.

On Monday, December 21, 1829, Statesman and Patriot senior editor Elijah H. Burritt and his associate editor John G. Polhill sat in the gallery of the House Chamber of the Georgia General Assembly and watched as representatives attempted to rush through legislation on this final day of the session. Burritt had come a long way to his seat as an observer in the legislature. He had been born to hard-luck Congregationalist farmers in New Britain, Connecticut. As a teen he was apprenticed to a blacksmith, where an accident left him disabled for several months. While recovering Burritt threw himself into the study of mathematics; family friends recognized his mathematical gifts and sent him to Williams College. Burritt’s benefactors subsidized a portion of his education, and he financed the remainder through part-time teaching. In spite of his own efforts, and those of his friends, Burritt could not continue to raise the funds necessary to stay at Williams. Around 1818, he decided to take his considerable mathematical and scientific skills and head south to Georgia, hoping to find his fortune in a region where there were relatively few well-educated men. In 1819, he married Ann Watson and became part of one of Georgia’s most prominent families. (His wife was a likely ancestor of

13Griffith and Talmadge, Georgia Journalism, 25-26. Chapter 2 of this work provides an excellent portrait of the escalating animosities between Georgia newspapermen. For further insight into the violent world of southern newspaper editors, see Virginius Dabney, Pistols and Pointed Pens: The Dueting Editors of Old Virginia (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1987).
14Tolis, Elijah Burritt, 86; Milledgeville Statesman and Patriot, August 27, 1827.
15Griffith and Talmadge, Georgia Journalism, 41.
Georgia Populist leader Tom Watson.) In 1827 he purchased the *Georgia Statesman* and combined it with his own *Georgia Patriot* to form the *Statesman and Patriot*. Polhill joined him at the paper in August 1829, becoming his business partner and co-editor.\(^6\)

On this day the two newspapermen had come to the legislature in order to report on the doings of government. Midway through the session Everett Pierce, secretary to Governor George Gilmer, brought over a message from the executive mansion. The governor reported that just the day before he had received a letter from Savannah mayor William T. Williams informing him of a most important and dangerous discovery. Several weeks before, police in Savannah had intercepted a package containing a pamphlet allegedly written by David Walker, a free black man, which urged the South’s enslaved black population to free itself through violent rebellion. This incendiary material had been brought to Savannah aboard a ship manned in part by free blacks and was being transported by a white man to a black preacher when it was seized by the authorities. Gilmer had included one of the pamphlets with his communique to the House in order that the representatives might appreciate its danger for themselves. The governor closed by urging the legislature in the strongest possible terms to pass legislation that would mandate the quarantining of all ships manned by Negroes in order to prevent any intercourse between them and the native black population. Gilmer acknowledged that Georgia’s right to take such action had been questioned, but “when the torch is ready to be applied to our Houses, and the assassin’s dirk drawn upon our breasts, is not a time when we can take in our defence to dispute with casuists in other States.” The House agreed and sent the matter to a special committee, and by the end of the day both houses of the Assembly had passed the legislation desired by the governor, including a provision that pro-

\(^6\)Tolis, *Elihu Burritt*, 3-8. License reflecting the marriage of Burritt to Ann Williams Watson, Columbia County Court of Ordinary (Marriages), Book A, 1807-1829, Drawer 91, Box 10, p. 137, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta, Ga. (hereinafter cited as GDAH); Ann Watson was from a member of the prominent Watson family of Columbia County. For the likely kinship of Ann Watson and Tom Watson see William W. Burton, *The Life and Times of Thomas E. Watson* (Atlanta, Ga., 1926), 11. For Burritt’s purchase of the *Georgia Statesman* see Bonner, *Milledgeville*, 60; Polhill’s partnership with Burritt is announced in *Statesman and Patriot*, August 1, 1829. On the significant role educated northerners played in the southern political economy, see Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 187-90.
hibited the circulation of any materials designed to incite insurrection among the Negro population; those convicted of doing so were to be put to death. All that remained was for the governor to sign the bill into law, which he did the following day.17

At the close of the day’s business the House Chamber was abuzz with curiosity-inspired activity regarding the sinister pamphlet. Who was its author? What did it say? Burritt discussed the pamphlet with a number of persons, including the senator from Lincoln County, Dr. Aza Beall, who had the copy that had been sent to the governor. Burritt wanted to read the despicable document (as did most of the others present) and managed to borrow the governor’s copy and take it back to his newspaper office. Once there Burritt was unable to read the document because he was constantly interrupted by subscribers or patrons. Knowing that he would have to return it before being able to read it thoroughly, he decided to write and request one or two copies for himself. The first letter he penned was to the mayor of Savannah, and then he wrote a second to David Walker, which read in relevant part:

Your “Appeal” was this day made the subject of Executive communication to the Legislature now in session in this place, which will pass some law in relation to matters involved in its circulation . . . and is likely to become a theme of considerable discussion and serious interest. . . . I have to request that you forward to me one or more copies, to this Office, and I will give you an order to receive the amount on some house in Boston, as soon as the same shall come to hand.18

Burritt retired to his home with the governor’s copy of Walker’s Appeal about 11:00 p.m., where he told his wife of the pamphlet and the stir it had caused in the legislature. As he was fatigued he asked a friend to read to him from the tract, but before the friend could proceed very far Burritt fell asleep.19

17Journal of the Georgia Legislature (Milledgeville, Ga., 1830), 353-57, 360-61, 364-65; Milledgeville Southern Recorder, July 31, 1830; Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia Passed at Milledgeville at an Annual Session in November and December 1829 (Milledgeville, Ga., 1830), 168-71. The relevant part of the law reads as follows: “Any person who shall circulate, bring or cause to be circulated or brought into this state . . . any printed or written pamphlet, paper or circular, for the purposes of exciting to insurrection, conspiracy or resistance among the slaves, negroes, or free persons of color . . . shall be punished with death.”

18Southern Recorder, July 31, 1830.

19Ibid., August 28, 1830.
On Monday, December 28, Mayor Williams wrote to Burritt that only a single copy of the Walker pamphlet had been kept in Savannah, and that it was in police custody. Burritt decided to write a newspaper column to inform the folk of Milledgeville and Baldwin County about Walker and his appeal to southern blacks. In this piece Burritt expressed his reluctance to discuss the matter because there was always the possibility of “eliciting, or promoting . . . excitement on a question of so deep a stake and momentous delicacy.” Nonetheless, as a newspaper editor he felt compelled to present what little that was known of Walker’s pamphlet “in order, if possible, that we may anticipate or prevent the misrepresentations of vague conjecture, and guard public opinion equally against undue excitement or indifference.” Burritt told his readers that the detestable declaration had been authored by a free black preacher in Boston, and published there the previous September. He recounted the circumstances surrounding the seizure of the pamphlets and concluded by assuring his audience that, while the pamphlets were of an insurrectionary nature, “it is obvious that no immediate mischief was generally proposed or intended,” and that there was no “digested or coherent plan, of rebellion.” In Burritt’s view, he was attempting to warn and inform the public about a potential danger—no less could be expected of a concerned and responsible newspaper editor.

Approximately two weeks later, during the regular term of the Bibb County Superior Court at Macon, Burritt went to the post office in Milledgeville, where he learned that the pamphlets from Walker had arrived. Much to his shock and dismay, he found that the black Bostonian had—in his enthusiasm—sent him not one or two copies of his controversial work but twenty! In an accompanying letter Walker thanked him for informing him of the activities of the Georgia legislature and subscribed the letter “Your friend, David Walker.” Controlling his anger at the forwardness and familiarity of Walker’s conduct, Burritt took the pamphlets back to the office of the Statesman and Patriot and returned to the business of running a newspaper. A short while later Polhill returned from the court proceedings in Macon; Burritt threw him a copy of Walker’s pamphlet and said, “I have got one of those books since you were

*Ibid.*, October 9, 1830.

**Statesman and Patriot**, January 2, August 28, 1830.
WALKER’S

APPEAL,

IN FOUR ARTICLES;

TOGETHER WITH

A PREAMBLE,

TO THE

COLOURED CITIZENS OF THE WORLD,

BUT IN PARTICULAR, AND VERY EXPRESSLY, TO THOSE OF

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

WRITTEN IN BOSTON, STATE OF MASSACHUSETTS,
SEPTEMBER 28, 1829.

THIRD AND LAST EDITION,
WITH ADDITIONAL NOTES, CORRECTIONS, &c.

BOSTON:
REVISED AND PUBLISHED BY DAVID WALKER.

1830.

Copies of David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* first appeared in Savannah in December 1829, where they were confiscated by police. Savannah mayor William T. Williams sent a single copy to Governor George Gilmer in Milledgeville, which was soon followed by twenty copies sent to Elijah Burritt by David Walker himself. The title page from the infamous pamphlet (above) is of a third edition, printed in Boston in 1830.

gone,” without saying what it was. Polhill, not knowing what it was, looked at the title page and determined the nature of the work and, as he was busily engaged in other matters, he placed it on his desk and thought nothing more of it. Burritt went home that evening still upset at Walker’s temerity and vented his frustrations on the matter in a conversation with his wife Ann.22

22*Southern Recorder*, July 31, 1830; Milledgeville *Federal Union*, August 7, 1830.
On Wednesday of the same week John H. Jones and his brother, former Habersham County deputy sheriff Malachi Jones, went to the *Statesman and Patriot* office to take out an advertisement. In the course of the transaction conversation turned to the controversial booklet, and Burritt told the Joneses that he had received a number of Walker’s pamphlets from the author after having been unable to obtain them from Savannah; indeed a stack of them were out on the desk. Malachi Jones expressed a desire to purchase one; Burritt responded that he had acquired them out of curiosity and did not have a price for them, but if Malachi wished to pay the postage on one of the pamphlets he could have it. Jones seized the opportunity and secured one of the infamous pamphlets for himself.\(^{23}\)

On Thursday, January 22, Jacob Norton and Samuel H. Russell visited Burritt at his office. The conversation again turned to Walker’s insurrectionary writings. Burritt told the two visitors that he had obtained copies and that he had planned to mail one to Norton, but since he was there he could take one with him, which Norton did. Before allowing Norton to leave Burritt urged him to be very careful in his use of the dangerous document. Several days later Burritt left Milledgeville for Augusta on business.\(^{24}\)

A few days after Burritt’s departure a relative of Polhill, Mr. Cole, visited him at the newspaper and Walker’s *Appeal* became the subject of discussion. Now reminded that he had a copy, Polhill searched for and found the book in a pigeonhole on a high shelf; when he pulled it out a second pamphlet fell from the opening. Polhill was surprised by the discovery of a second pamphlet but decided that he would ask Burritt about it when he returned. Polhill took the polemic home, and he and Cole read from it until they became disgusted with it.

A day or two after the discovery of the pamphlets Polhill went to the post office to retrieve correspondence for the newspaper. A letter was handed to him that had been postmarked at Boston and addressed to the *Statesman and Patriot* in care of Elijah Burritt. The direction authorized him to open the letter, which he did. To Polhill’s amazement, the letter had been written to Burritt by none

\(^{23}\) *Southern Recorder*, October 9, 1830.

\(^{24}\) *Ibid. ; Mt. Zion Hancock Advertiser*, April 12, 1830.
other than David Walker! Walker stated that he had sent Burritt twenty copies of his work several weeks before and that he expected Burritt to honor their “engagement.” Walker also mentioned having completed a second edition of his Appeal and told Burritt he could have copies of it as well if he wished. Walker again subscribed the letter with the term “friend.” Polhill believed that this letter had been directed to him in order to awaken him to the insidious conduct in which it was now apparent that Burritt was engaging. (He never named the person who directed him to open the Walker letter.) Polhill immediately returned to his office and went to the shelf where he had found the two pamphlets several days before. This time he found fifteen of the cursed documents. Discounting the single booklet in his possession, four of them were missing—Burritt was distributing them! What was the “engagement” of which Walker spoke? Polhill feared that Burritt was conspiring with Walker to undermine and destroy a community to which “his greatest earthly attachments were interwoven.”

Later in the day Polhill met with Senator Howell Cobb of Houston County and Baldwin County representative Burton Hepburn and apprised them of his discoveries and sought their counsel. The three agreed that a group of friends of Burritt and Polhill should be assembled early the next morning in order to decide upon the proper course of action. The next day Polhill, Cobb and Hepburn met at the Statesman and Patriot with Colonel John Bozeman, Colonel Robert Ruffin, Dr. Tomlinson Fort and Samuel Rockwell. These men were not only friends but community leaders and members of the Clark faction. Burton Hepburn and John Bozeman had served together as inspectors at the state penitentiary; Polhill had been a state representative; and Rockwell was the current intendant (mayor) of Milledgeville. Polhill managed Rockwell’s business affairs when the latter was out of town. The most powerful man present was Tomlinson Fort, who had served in Congress since 1826 and had just completed his most recent term. He was also considered leader of the Clark faction and was a confidante of both Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun. Fort and Rockwell served together as directors of the Milledgeville branch of the Bank of Darien.

*Federal Union, August 7, 1830.*
Fort, Rockwell, Bozeman and Ruffin were shown the pamphlet and the letter from Walker. According to Polhill, several members of the group wanted to wait two or three days for Burritt’s return in order to confront him with the evidence, inform him that he had lost his standing in the community, and to ask him to leave the state. However, after determining that the acts committed by Burritt may have constituted a capital offense, the group agreed that decisive action must be taken forthwith. To hesitate would be to make group members accessories to Burritt’s heinous crime if he were found guilty. They decided not to wait and hear Burritt’s explanation and agreed that the governor should be notified in order that he might take whatever action that the public’s safety demanded.26

Intendant Rockwell and Polhill secured an audience with Georgia’s chief executive. The appearance of two Clarkites at his doorstep must have been troubling to George Gilmer, not only because he was a member of the Troup faction, but because the circumstances surrounding his recent election left him in a vulnerable position. Because the Clark party candidate for governor had died several weeks before the election it appeared that the Troup faction had a clear road to the executive mansion, but it was not quite so simple. The Troup faction had split into two sub-factions, one that supported Gilmer and one that supported William H. Crawford’s son Joel. Since they did not have a candidate, the Clark faction decided to support Gilmer in hopes of gaining a share in the patronage of state business and offices. Gilmer received two-thirds of the vote, but it was not long before the Clarkites came to collect their just due. On the morning of his inauguration Gilmer was visited by the editor of the leading Clark party paper, who insisted that patronage be divided evenly between the two parties; Gilmer refused. The next day the new governor was

26Ibid. For the relationship between Burton Hepburn and John Bozeman, see the Milledgeville Georgia Journal, December 27, 1825; Bozeman and Tomlinson Fort as political allies; Fort as leader of Clark faction; Fort and Samuel Rockwell as bank directors; John Polhill takes care of Rockwell’s business affairs when he is out of town. See Statesman and Patriot, August 8, 1827; August 30, 1828; January 17, 1829; January 2, 1830; Fort’s only preparation for his wedding was to invite Bozeman. See Fort to Martha Fannin, October 8, 1824, Tomlinson Fort Papers, Special Collections, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga. Fort asked Andrew Jackson to appoint Robert Ruffin postmaster at Augusta—his only such request of Jackson. See Fort to Jackson, June 12, 1829, ibid. For Polhill as a Clarkite state representative see Bonner, Milledgeville, 58.
visited by another Clarkite who asked that he raise funds to support a widow whose husband had been killed in a duel with one of the Crawfords; Gilmer declined this and all other requests for similar favors. The Clarkites turned against him for his apparent ingratitude. Gilmer now found himself as a man without a country as a significant portion of the Troup faction resented him for opposing Joel Crawford. Gilmer expressed his vulnerability: "I soon found out that to be a chief magistrate of the State, when party politics are violent, without party support, is to run barefoot over a thorny way." It is probably not an exaggeration to say that Gilmer was not pleased to greet two more Clarkites requesting special favors.27

The pair offered to present the evidence against Burritt but the governor refused to view it, even though he had had a conversation with Burritt several days prior that made him suspicious of the former New Englander. Gilmer suggested that Polhill initiate the prosecution; he declined to do so and took the pamphlet and Walker's letter to his home and placed them under lock and key. Polhill again met with Rockwell, who insisted that he initiate a prosecution of Burritt. Polhill replied that he had done all that could be expected of a private citizen, particularly one who had been a friend and business associate of the future accused. Rockwell conceded and went back to the governor, who—after hearing Polhill's concerns—agreed to initiate the prosecution himself.28 One can only imagine the pressure Gilmer must have been under. If he refused to prosecute Burritt, the Clark faction could use his inaction as a foil against him and the Troup party (particularly since the Clark party already felt slighted); if it turned out that Burritt was guilty, both political factions and the public at large would turn on him. His way was very thorny indeed.

In the meantime Polhill went to the post office and spoke with Postmaster Thomas F. Green, who reported that when Burritt picked up the Walker pamphlets he had acted suspiciously, saying that the insurrectionary tracts were the tax pamphlets of Matthew Cary. Postmaster Green spoke with Rhodam Green, who had alleg-

26Carey, "Parties and Politics in Antebellum Georgia," 26; George Rockingham Gilmer, Georgians: Sketches of Some of the First Settlers of Upper Georgia, of the Cherokees, and the Author (c1855; rpt., Danielsville, Ga., 1989), 245-46. The name of this leading Clark paper nor its editor were provided by Gilmer.

27Federal Union, August 7, September 25, 1830.
edly received a pamphlet from Burritt, and became convinced that Burritt was spreading insurrectionary sentiments around the county. Polhill took this new information to Governor Gilmer, who, on February 11, ordered Justice of the Peace Baradel P. Stubbs to begin the prosecution without delay. The justice of the peace deposed Polhill and the Greens and issued a warrant for Burritt’s arrest.29

When Burritt returned to Milledgeville on February 12, he was immediately arrested and brought before Stubbs; however, he was discharged because no one came forward as prosecutor. Stubbs requested that the governor act as prosecutor, but Gilmer responded that he had done all that was required of his office and that to do more would be improper.30 In order to remove the legal defect, the town commissioners of Milledgeville met later in the day. Samuel Buffington, Isaac T. Cushing, Peter J. Williams, and William H. Torrance listened as Intendant Samuel Rockwell told the version of Burritt’s crime concocted by Rockwell and his political associates. (It is almost certain that Rockwell presented the evidence, as the available sources indicate that he was the only one present who had firsthand knowledge of Burritt’s actions at this point.) The assembled commissioners had reason to listen to the Fort/Rockwell clique sympathetically. Buffington and John Bozeman had served as inspectors of the state penitentiary during Williams’s term as its keeper. Williams and Rockwell were considered leading members of the First Presbyterian Church; and Williams may have been a friend or business associate of Tomlinson Fort. Moreover, Rockwell and Cushing were Masons in the Grand Lodge at Milledgeville; Rockwell was deputy grand master and Cushing served under him as grand steward. Masonic tenets demanded that brothers protect and serve one another and keep each other’s trust and secrets. (It should be noted that Postmaster Thomas Green, who stated that Burritt had lied about the true nature of Walker’s pamphlets when he received them, was also a Milledgeville Mason.) The final member of the group, Torrance, was a Troupite who already distrusted Burritt. After hearing Rock-

*Ibid.; George Gilmer to B.P. Stubbs, February 11, 1830, Governor’s Letter Book, Drawer 62, Box 64, 61-62, GDAH.

*Gilmer to Stubbs, February 12, 1830, Governor’s Letter Book, 62.
well’s evidence the commissioners ordered the town marshal to act as prosecutor against Burritt and Milledgeville would bear all costs associated with the prosecution.31

Burritt was again arrested by town authorities, who convened a second hearing. But before this hearing began Burritt prepared an article for publication in his paper, which he hoped would vindicate him by explaining all that he had done concerning Walker’s Appeal. Polhill quashed this vindication, and it was never printed. (Later it was mysteriously destroyed.) The second hearing ended with Burritt’s discharge, as there were technical flaws in the charging affidavit and the arrest warrant. Burritt returned to the offices of the newspaper to find that Polhill had resigned. Knowing that his situation could only get worse and that if he re-

31Minutes of the Commissioners of the Town of Milledgeville, February 12, 1830, Drawer 200, Box 10, GDAH; Bonner, Milledgeville, 92-93. William Torrance’s status as a Troupite is suggested by his friendship with Crawford family member and future Governor George W. Crawford; he conveys his dislike and distrust for Burritt to Crawford. See Torrance to Crawford, February 15, 1830, MSS collection 611, Special Collections, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries (hereinafter cited as Torrance Letter).
mained he could hang, Burritt fled Milledgeville for New England, abandoning his wife, children, and business interests. Shortly after Burritt’s exodus, Polhill returned to take over the Statesman and Patriot.32

In order to ensure that Burritt would not escape prosecution if he should ever return, he was indicted by a Baldwin County Superior Court grand jury. Once again the jury was made up of men who would have been sympathetic to the Fort/Rockwell clique, or who would be considered inappropriate witnesses under modern rules of criminal procedure. Today individuals who might be biased or who have prior knowledge of the case are prohibited from serving on grand juries, but that was not true in 1830. In fact, grand jury members were required by law to act as accusers and to present their personal knowledge of crimes that had been committed.33 Isaac Cushing and Baradel P. Stubbs were on the grand jury. Both men had prior knowledge of the case and had previously thought Burritt guilty; both men would have had a vested interest in seeing Burritt indicted. Stubbs had found that sufficient cause existed to bring Burritt to trial, and Cushing had voted similarly during the meeting of town commissioners. These men were probably the ones who made the case against Burritt, given their roles in prior proceedings. Grand jury member R. J. Nichols was a leading member of the First Presbyterian Church along with Rockwell and Peter J. Williams, and he served as a director of the Milledgeville branch of the Bank of Darien with Rockwell and Tomlinson Fort; by this point the account of the Fort/Rockwell clique would have made its way around the circle of their friends. And the Masonic influence again found its way into the proceedings. The clerk of the Baldwin County Superior Court (and the man who presided over the grand jury) was William J. Davis, a member of the Grand Lodge, as was grand juror John Miller. After hearing the testimony of the partisans and considering Burritt’s

32Federal Union, August 7, September 25, 1830; Southern Recorder, September 11, 1830; Bonner, Milledgeville, 60; Polhill announced that he had taken over full editorial responsibilities in the Statesman and Patriot, February 20, 1830 (Burritt had departed on February 14).

33A law to this effect had just been passed in the last session of the legislature. See Arthur Foster, A Digest of the Laws of the State of Georgia (Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, 1831), 185.
hasty departure, the grand jury had no problem indicting the
former editor of the *Statesman and Patriot*.34

Although Burritt had been formally accused by two judicial
bodies, the available evidence suggests that he had not committed
a crime. First, he requested “Walker’s Appeal” before the legislation
passed by the General Assembly had been signed into law by Gov-
ernor Gilmer, so he could not be found guilty of causing insurrec-
tionary material to be brought into the state. As for Burritt’s
distribution of the pamphlets, in order to convict him of a viola-
tion of the 1829 act the prosecution would have been required to
prove that he had circulated them for the purpose of “exciting to
insurrection, conspiracy or resistance . . . the slaves, Negroes and
free persons of color.”35 From what was known by Polhill and the
judicial authorities of Milledgeville and Baldwin County at the
time of his arrest, Burritt did not distribute the pamphlets for this
purpose. The handful of pamphlets that were removed from the
*Statesman and Patriot* were found in the possession of respected cit-
zens who had acquired them out of curiosity and concern—the
same reasons that had motivated Polhill to take one of the incen-
diary documents to his own home to share with Mr. Cole, and
which moved Dr. Beall to give Burritt the governor’s copy of the
pamphlet. As of late January and early February 1830, no one (Pol-
hill included) came forward to provide one shred of evidence that
proved any malicious intent on Burritt’s behalf. These legal short-
comings might explain why the affidavit and arrest warrant were
quashed after the second hearing.

The persecution of Elijah Burritt was not the work of the hys-
terical mob, as suggested by several scholars, but was the handi-

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34The original records of the grand jury proceedings were destroyed in a fire at the Bal-
dwin County courthouse in 1861; however, membership of the grand jury was contained in
the *Georgia Journal*, March 6, 1830. For R. J. Nichols’s membership in the First Presbyterian
Church, see Bonner, *Milledgeville*, 92-93. For Nichols’s role as bank director, see *Statesman
and Patriot*, January 17, 1829. Davis and Miller were officers in the Grand Lodge in 1830 and
1831, respectively; see William S. Rockwell, *Ahiman Rezon* (New York, 1859), 338. Davis was
a member of the lodge in 1828; see *Georgia Journal*, December 11, 1828. In order for Miller
to have become an officer by 1830, he would have had to have been a member for several
years. William Rockwell discusses the progression through degrees of masonry and the re-
quirements for leadership in his work; Baradel Stubbs may have been a leader in the First
Presbyterian Church as well, as he would serve with Samuel Rockwell and Clarkite John A.
Cathbert on the executive committee of the Georgia Presbyterian Education Society in

work of several powerful men. \textsuperscript{36} At each stage of the process, from the decision to seek the governor’s aid in the prosecution to indictment by the grand jury, members of the Fort/Rockwell clique were present to render their version of events, or were in positions that allowed them considerable influence with others in the decision-making process. But perhaps more important than what members of the clique did, was what at least some of them \textit{did not} do, and that is, defend Elijah Burritt. In a letter to George W. Crawford, William Torrance stated that “with one unanimous voice his [Burritt’s] heretofore friends denounced him and called also for the execution of the Law.”\textsuperscript{37} This denunciation mattered as much as any direct action taken by the clique to secure Burritt’s ouster. In the hostile political atmosphere of Milledgeville, a man in trouble was lost without political allies. (Remember Gilmer’s lament.) When the allegations against Burritt surfaced one can expect that the Troup faction would not lift a finger to defend him, but when his friends \textit{unanimously} proclaimed their belief in his guilt and moved for the “execution of the Law,” Burritt’s guilt in the public mind was virtually assured. The importance of loyalty in the violently partisan political atmosphere of Georgia is made clear in the case of Jacob Norton.

Burritt had given Norton, editor of the \textit{Hancock Advertiser} (a newspaper operated at Mt. Zion, Georgia), a copy of Walker’s \textit{Appeal} on January 22. Like Burritt, he was a transplanted northerner, having come south eleven years earlier (a year after Burritt). Upon his return to Hancock County, Norton loaned the pamphlet to four local slaveholders who asked for the booklet out of curiosity. Norton urged them to exercise caution in its circulation, the same prudence Burritt had urged upon Norton. After Burritt’s apparent guilt-indicating departure, the eye of suspicion was turned on his northern brother Norton. It was alleged by his enemies that he was in conspiracy with Burritt, and by inference, David Walker. Soon the accusations gained momentum and a bewildered Norton found himself compelled to put up a defense against his increasingly vocal enemies. Norton could have taken his place beside


\textsuperscript{37}Torrance Letter.
Burritt as a victim of politics and the fear of insurrection, but his friends behaved differently than Burritt’s. Norton’s friends and political allies came to his aid in the form of sworn statements and letters attesting to his character and the fact that he had circulated the *Appeal* prudently, and for the purpose of providing needed information to reputable citizens. In order to cement his credentials as a southerner Norton wrote a passionate editorial in defense of slavery on May 3. On May 10, the entire Inferior Court of Hancock County threw their confidence and support behind him. With the unwavering public support of his allies Norton weathered the storm and nothing more became of the allegations.38

Elijah Burritt would not have been forced to leave Milledgeville if his “friends” had acted differently. If Polhill had not taken the discovery of the pamphlets as evidence of a conspiracy to foment servile insurrection there would have been no meeting of notables to decide on a course of action. Had the assembled notables not gone to the governor, Burritt would not have been charged or arrested. If these same men had not provided their version of events to the various accusatory bodies it is likely that Burritt would not have been suspected of any wrongdoing, particularly since he had made no secret of his possession of Walker’s *Appeal*, had written an editorial on the subject, and—as far as the world knew—had only given the pamphlet to two respected white men. This view is supported by the fact that no one has ever suggested that Burritt’s actions prior to his departure for Augusta created the slightest stir. Public sentiment could have been swayed in Burritt’s favor during his second hearing if Polhill had not quashed his vindication. And finally, if at least some of his political friends had stood by him, he would have probably been able to successfully defend himself. So the question becomes, “Why did Burritt’s friends turn against him?”

Scholars who have written of the Elijah Burritt affair have supposed that Burritt was persecuted because he was a northern man with abolitionist sympathies. Some have based their conclusions on the fact that Burritt’s brother was abolitionist Elihu Burritt. Others have simply reasoned that a family that produced a famous abolitionist could not have produced someone who supported, or

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*Hancock Advertiser, April 12, 19, May 10, 1830.*
was indifferent to slavery. The first argument fails on cursory examination. At the time Elijah Burritt was suffering his travails in Milledgeville, his brother Elihu was a teen; he did not become an anti-slavery advocate until much later. In fact, it was Burritt’s persecution in the South that prodded the younger Burritt to adopt the abolitionist cause. As to the second contention, it is certainly possible for members of families to have conflicting views on moral questions; such was the case with Elijah Burritt.

In order for Burritt’s friends to reasonably believe that he held abolitionist views, he would have had to have expressed them publicly or privately. In over four years as editor of the Georgia Patriot or the Statesman and Patriot, Elijah Burritt never published a single editorial that might be considered as being sympathetic to the abolitionist cause. In fact, the opposite was true. In several editorials Burritt expressed his belief that African Americans were inferior, “profligate” and “the meanest of God’s creation”; they were “a large, illiterate, ferocious and treacherous” segment of the population. He was convinced that the efforts of the American Colonization Society were a ploy to promote general emancipation, which he vehemently opposed. According to Burritt, if the dictates of this society were followed, he and his white, southern fellows could expect to have their “pockets rifled” and perhaps their “brains knocked out”! In a similar editorial he accused the American Colonization Society of encouraging racial intermarriage, which repulsed him. Burritt supported Andrew Jackson in his bid for the presidency because of his strong pro-slavery views. The Tennessean was “uncontaminated by European views of black slavery” and would not lend support to colonization, which had an “obvious tendency to wrap our towns and villages in the flames of servile war.” In every particular Burritt shared the views of his Old South brethren. No one who read Burritt’s views could reasonably

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6Howard, “The Georgia Reaction to David Walker’s Appeal,” 62; Donaldson, “By Thy Words,” 30, 32n9; Bonner, Milledgeville, 60; Griffith and Talmadge, Georgia Journalism, 37; Tolis, Elihu Burritt, 87; Aptheker, To Be Free, 47; Curti, Learned Blacksmith, 118n1; Hinks, To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren, 125.

7Tolis, Elihu Burritt, 84.


9Statesman and Patriot, February 4, 25, 1828.
imagine that he would aid David Walker in putting the torch to the South on behalf of those he clearly despised.

It might be argued that Burritt’s public pronouncements were politic, that in private he expressed other views to his friends. In light of who his friends were, this is highly unlikely. Burritt’s closest friends were among the most powerful men in the state, and they were slaveholders. These men would not have embraced a man who expressed views that were antithetical to their economic and social order. Burritt was appointed to several public offices, honors that would not have been bestowed on a man who was known in the community as an opponent of slavery. An additional indicator of Burritt’s status in the community and the Clark party was his relationship with party leader Tomlinson Fort. Burritt was among the select few whose opinions Fort sought as he considered a bid for Congress in 1826. Perhaps most telling about Burritt’s views on slavery was his involvement in the “peculiar institution.” In 1828 a slave named Mat was levied and sold at auction to satisfy a debt owed to Burritt. Court-ordered sales of this type were far more disruptive of slave family life than commercial sales and therefore would not be acceptable to an abolitionist or person of conscience. It is also instructive that Burritt never joined any anti-slavery organization after his return to the North, even though he was recruited. Burritt may have been a slaveholder himself. In his letter to George Crawford, William Torrance reported that Burritt had taken a slave on a trip to New York in the summer of 1829.43

If Polhill and others could not have reasonably believed that Burritt was an opponent of slavery, why did they put him on the path to the gallows? It might be argued that they were caught up in the hysterical paranoia that accompanied insurrection scares. But in this case a crucial ingredient was missing: blacks. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown has observed, during insurrection scares the involve-

43Milledgeville Georgia Statesman, April 4, June 13, 1826; Statesman and Patriot, June 7, 1828. For slave sale, see Georgia Journal, February 18, 1828. For impact of court-ordered sales, see Thomas D. Russell, “Articles Sell Best Singly: The Disruption of Slave Families at Court Sales,” Utah Law Review (No. 4, 1996): 1161-1209; Tolis, Elihu Burritt, 86. For Burritt/Fort congressional consultation, see Georgia Statesman, May 9, 1826; for slaveholding status of Burritt’s friends, see Baldwin County Tax Digest for 1828, Baldwin County Court of Ordinary, Drawer 187, Box 27, GDAH; for slaveholdings of Polhill see Fourth (1820) Census of United States Population, Roll 8, Vol. 3, p. 15; and Fifth (1830) Census of United States Population, Roll 16, Vol. 5, p. 40; Torrance Letter. Even if Burritt did not own the slave he took to the North, he was entrusted with him by a slaveholder.
ment of an African American in the alleged activity—at least a rumor of African-American involvement—was generally required to propel the populace to irrationality. In this case no slave or free black in Milledgeville was ever mentioned in connection with the affair, certainly not at the point when Polhill and company met at the Statesman and Patriot to decide Elijah Burritt’s fate.

The lack of genuine belief in Burritt’s complicity with David Walker is suggested in a letter from Tomlinson Fort to a friend in Congress regarding postal restrictions on abolitionist literature. Fort stated that he had come into possession of a number of copies of Walker’s Appeal because they had been “directed by the author to an imprudent man who who [sic] had written for them.” Fort then went on for the next three pages to denounce and disparage Walker and to call for action against him and others like him. Fort’s choice of the word “imprudent” is telling. In its antebellum meanings Fort described Burritt as “foolish,” “rash,” “heedless,” “indiscreet” or “incautious,” hardly the terms one would use to describe a person engaged in a conspiracy to stir slaves to revolution. Burritt’s treatment in the letter also suggests that Fort did not believe that Burritt was in conspiracy with Walker. He presented him as acquiring the pamphlets but no purpose is attributed to the acquisition—a huge omission if Burritt and Walker were viewed as partners in the enterprise, which is what Fort and his friends claimed in public. From the manner in which Burritt is portrayed in the letter, one could not draw any inference that he and Walker were acting in concert for unlawful purposes; after the first page Burritt is not mentioned again, and all evil is attributed to Walker. Fort did not describe an evil man, but a foolish one. The reluctance of Polhill, Rockwell or any of the other accusers to step forward as prosecutor also argues against genuine belief in Burritt-as-insurrectionist. If these men had truly believed that Burritt was attempting to overthrow the slave regime, would friendship or political expediency have stood in the way of any of them rushing forward to avert this calamity? Given the southern response to true insurrection scares, it is doubtful.

Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 405-417.
Fort to Edward Everett, February 15, 1830, Fort Papers.
If the Fort/Rockwell clique did not believe that Burritt was acting to destroy slavery, why did they make such a potentially lethal accusation against him? Elijah and Ann Burritt provide the answer. The Burritts (and others in Milledgeville) claimed that Elijah had become extremely unpopular in his own party, and that the chimera of slave insurrection was disingenuously used to oust him from the editorship of the *Statesman and Patriot*.

Newspapers were the lifeblood of any political party. Editors had to be violently partisan and tow the party line. During the 1820s newspapers supporting the Troup faction dominated the political landscape, which in turn contributed considerably to the flagging fortunes of the Clark faction. Troupites had won the governorship in 1825, 1827 and 1829; in 1829, the Clark faction was forced to support Troupite Gilmer as Georgia’s chief executive. The most powerful Troup paper, Milledgeville’s *Southern Recorder*, was instrumental in the Troup victory in the heated gubernatorial election of 1825. The *Southern Recorder* was backed by the *Georgia Journal*. The only Clark paper to do battle with these two powerful Troup papers in the critical Milledgeville newspaper market was the *Statesman and Patriot*, and by 1830 it was clear to members of the Clark faction that Elijah Burritt was not up to the task.

After his forced departure from Milledgeville, Burritt claimed that he became unpopular with members of his faction because of his defense of the Cherokees, whom the Georgians were seeking to remove from the state. According to Burritt, it was his “spirited stand in the cause of humanity and justice towards this hunted and abused race that led the people of Milledgeville to visit upon my head their accumulated wrath.” This is perhaps a more heroic self-portrait than the evidence warrants. In every editorial he wrote on the subject, Burritt supported removal of the Cherokees. He believed that the Native Americans were inferior, and he opposed intermarriage with them. He supported Andrew Jackson for president in part because of his Indian removal policies. Judging

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“Tolis, Elihu Burritt, 85; *Southern Recorder*, August 14, 1830.


Milledgeville became the state capital of Georgia in 1807 and remained so until 1868. The state house, where the General Assembly met and where the legislature responded to the threat posed by Walker’s Appeal, was constructed in 1807 and expanded several times since. This is how it appeared around 1830. Sketch from Georgia Department of Archives and History.

by his editorials, it appears that Burritt’s humanity toward the Cherokees consisted not in insisting that they be allowed to remain in their ancestral homeland, but only that constitutional and nonviolent means be used to effect their removal. Burritt’s views were not significantly different from those of his party or most Georgians at this point in the Cherokee removal controversy; and it is extremely unlikely that anyone would level a possibly deadly charge against him because of them. Additionally, Cherokee removal did not hold political center stage in 1828 or 1829. That role was reserved for the tariff. It was Burritt’s position on this issue that put him at odds with his party.

Beginning in 1827, Burritt continually expressed the belief that protective tariffs would serve as a spur to southern manufacturing. He wrote numerous editorials defending this principle; he supported Andrew Jackson because of his supposed pro-tariff inclinations; and he waged war against the anti-tariff Southern Re-

50Statesman and Patriot, December 31, 1827; February 25, May 17, 1828; May 30, June 20, July 25, August 1, 29, November 21, 1829.
corder and the Georgia Journal. Even with the passage of the "Tariff of Abominations" in 1828, Burritt continued to insist that Georgia would benefit from the tariff if it expanded its manufactures. These views put him at odds not only with both factions but the majority of people in the state as well. Tariff opponents did not dispute the power of the federal government to levy tariffs in order to raise revenue; they believed it unconstitutional to use tariffs to encourage manufacturing. Georgians believed that the state economy would suffer under such an arrangement, and as a result were largely uninterested in manufacturing. The tariff would become a defining issue not only for political parties in Georgia but for the entire South. As late as December 26, 1829—several days after he first came into possession of Walker's Appeal—Burritt was still supporting the tariff as a positive good for the state. While he publicly acknowledged the unpopularity of his position, Burritt was determined to hold his ground.51 The tariff was becoming a watershed issue in state, regional and national politics; the Clark party could ill-afford to have a man at the helm of its most critically positioned newspaper who did not champion the party position at this critical juncture.

The political nature of the takeover of the Statesman and Patriot is further evidenced by events after Burritt's departure. Tomlinson Fort placed a lien on property of the paper to satisfy debts owed to him and Polhill took over its editorship. Burritt had stated in several editorials that he disliked vociferous partisanship and that he tried to keep that sort of negative editorial behavior to a minimum. Polhill had no such scruples. The editorial tone and stance of the paper became more sharply anti-Troup. Burritt's departure and Polhill's ascendancy to the senior editorship was cheered by the pro-Clark Washington News; the paper's editor opined that "although the Editorial department has been lessened in number, it will add strength to its success, by uniting a greater degree of confidence among its friends." This warm appraisal was seconded by the pro-Troup Warrenton Rural Cabinet—a testament to Burritt's

"Carey, "Parties and Politics," 25-26; Statesman and Patriot, December 10, 1827; February 18, 25, March 17, 21, May 10, 31, June 28, July 5, 12, 26, August 2, September 13, November 15, December 20, 1828; January 3, 10, 24, February 7, May 5, December 26, 1829."
general unpopularity because of his advocacy of the tariff. And the true feelings of the Clark party regarding Burritt’s tariff position came out in a Polhill editorial of June 12, 1830, where he responded to claims by Southern Recorder editor Seaton Grantland that the Clark party waffled in its tariff position, as reflected in the Statesman and Patriot. Polhill sarcastically proclaimed:

You are neither liberal nor fair in your abortive attempts to shew [sic] the deviations of the Clark Party from their well known doctrines. If the Statesman did some time since advocate the Tariff, you know perfectly well that the party never did. Why should you endeavor to make your patrons believe what you know is not true? It is unnecessary to disavow for the Clark party opinions that you and everybody else know, they never avowed or entertained. You may as well charge them with a design to circulate “Walker’s Pamphlet,” as to charge them with advocating the Tariff, because the Statesman once did so. Their views on the subject were never fully expressed by this paper till it passed into present hands. . . . Still they [the Clark party] agree in their constitutional principles, and in none more unanimously than an opposition to the Tariff by every temperate, lawful and constitutional means of resistance.

Polhill summed up the Elijah Burritt affair nicely: the ousted editor had advocated positions that were extremely damaging to his party, and David Walker provided them with the means of getting rid of him.

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52Georgia Journal, April 30, 1830; Georgia Statesman, April 18, 1826; January 3, 1829. View of the Washington News reprinted in Augusta Chronicle and Georgia Advertiser, February 27, 1830; Warrenton Rural Cabinet, February 27, 1830. For shift in editorial tone see Polhill editorials in the Statesman and Patriot from February 16 through July 3, 1830.

53Statesman and Patriot, June 12. 1830. Hinks identifies Burritt’s support of the tariff as a factor that contributed to his ouster, but not as the single most important cause, as I do. He believes that Burritt’s support for tariffs, opposition to Cherokee removal, probable abolitionist sensibility, and northern roots combined to “deepen” the suspicions of a Burritt/Walker alliance in the eyes of Polhill, the general public, and Burritt’s political enemies, most notably George Gilmer, all of which combined to lead to Burritt’s downfall. Hinks, To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren, 123-26. As noted above, Gilmer was hardly an enthusiastic persecutor because of his political vulnerability; and as I have averred, it was Burritt’s political friends, and not his Troupite enemies, who were responsible for his demise. Similarly, John Talmadge believes that while Polhill and company wanted to remove an incompetent (not politically dangerous) Burritt from the Statesman and Patriot, they did not act consciously but may have been moved “unconsciously” to “readily accept” Burritt’s guilt. Talmadge, “The Burritt Mystery,” 540. As I argue above, the actions of Polhill and his cohorts were quite conscious.
It might be argued that charging an editor with a capital crime was an extreme method of securing his removal, but there is a good reason why this accusation was particularly advantageous to the accusers. If the Clark party leaders had attempted to force Burritt out over the tariff issue, it would probably have resulted in a protracted public battle. Such a battle would surely have been used against the Clark faction by their Troupite enemies; this might explain why the Clark faction did not move against Burritt during 1829, a gubernatorial campaign year. Establishing a competing newspaper would have presented similar difficulties. The Clarkites could have waited for the collapse of the heavily indebted weekly but that would have taken time, and Burritt could continue with his politically damaging editorials. By levelling the insurrection charge against Burritt the Clark faction avoided these potential political pitfalls. The Troup faction could not make a credible charge of abolitionism against the Clark party or its principal members (given their status and stature as slaveholders), nor could it come to Burritt's aid without exposing itself to charges of harboring anti-slavery sentiments. By negatively linking Burritt with David Walker and his Appeal, the Fort/Rockwell clique was able to get rid of the recalcitrant editor in timely fashion without exposing themselves to the political fallout that would have resulted had other methods been employed.

Once Burritt was gone, the Clark party could get about the business of building a powerhouse partisan newspaper. On July 3, 1830, the Statesman and Patriot closed its doors forever and was reborn on July 17 as the Federal Union, with John G. Polhill as its editor-in-chief. In the maiden issue, Polhill reported that the printing presses and related equipment of Burritt's now-defunct Statesman and Patriot had been sold at sheriff's auction; he also had news of "Walker's Appeal." A third edition of the infamous pamphlet had been received at a post office in Georgia. This announcement ig-

4For the dire financial condition of the Statesman and Patriot, see Southern Recorder, August 14, 1830 and Federal Union, August 21, 1830. At this point it is appropriate to consider why Polhill and company were so insistent that Governor Gilmer act as prosecutor, since any citizen could bring charges against another. (Polhill was a lawyer and surely knew this. See Georgia Journal, April 10, 1827.) If Gilmer had moved forward as prosecutor, the role of Polhill, et al., would have been minimized or maybe even concealed entirely. The prosecution could also have been viewed as a Troupite political attack, which the Clark faction could have turned to its advantage.
nited a newspaper war between Polhill and the *Southern Recorder’s* Seaton Grantland. Grantland accused Polhill of betraying a friend and leaving a family destitute for wholly political reasons. Polhill responded by accusing Grantland of coming to the aid of a man he hated for purely political reasons. (Grantland was running for Congress.) The question of Elijah Burritt’s guilt or innocence gave the Clark and Troup factions another opportunity to strike at each other. The war of words escalated and went on through October, but died down when Burritt failed to return. The next year Grantland and *Federal Union* co-editor (and Clark party second-in-command) John A. Cuthbert attacked each other on the steps of the state house with pistols and swords over a political insult published in the *Southern Recorder*. Tomlinson Fort would go on to financially support and then buy the *Federal Union*; political and personal hostilities between it and the *Southern Recorder* would continue for the next four decades, until they were combined to form the *Union Recorder* in 1872. The Clarkites had gotten what they wanted: a newspaper with which to do no-holds-barred battle with their political opponents. As for Elijah Burritt, he died in 1838 of an unnamed disease on an ill-fated expedition to establish a colony in Texas that would have been a second chance at life after the personal tragedy he had suffered at Milledgeville.

David Walker’s *Appeal* was the most militant statement of black protest and indignation that had ever hit the South, and it created a highly charged and paranoid social and political atmosphere in Georgia. In this climate it was certainly possible that an individual who expressed abolitionist sentiments could have found himself publicly shamed, run out of town or executed for those views. But in the case of Elijah Burritt, fear of Walker’s powerful polemic was not the cause of the northern editor’s downfall; instead, this fear was used as a tool that achieved several private, personal and po-

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*Federal Union, July 17, August 7, September 25, 1830; Southern Recorder, July 24, 31, August 14, 28, September 11, October 9, 1830; Bonner, Milledgeville, 62-63.

*Griffith and Talmadge, Georgia Journalism, 30-31; Carey, “Parties and Politics in Antebellum Georgia,” 132.

Political goals of Burritt’s accusers: John Polhill rose to the chief editorship of a major newspaper, Tomlinson Fort collected a personal debt, and the Clark party gained a strident, partisan, political voice. David Walker’s *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* did more than strike fear into the hearts of southern white men—the effect traditionally attributed to it; it provided a group of them with an avenue to power. Given the hold that slavery had on the Old South and its politics, the personal and political motivations of those who would persecute and condemn others for opposing human bondage should be fully explored.