

5-1983

# Henry Alexander Wise, Minister to Brazil, 1844-1847

Dennis Rodgers Custis

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HENRY ALEXANDER WISE, MINISTER TO BRAZIL, 1844-1847

BY

DENNIS RODGERS CUSTIS

A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND  
IN CANDIDACY  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS  
IN HISTORY

MAY 1983

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VIRGINIA

HENRY ALEXANDER WISE, MINISTER TO BRAZIL, 1844-1847

by

Dennis Rodgers Custis

Approved by

*Ernest C. Bolt, Jr.*

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Thesis Director

*Richard Barry Weston*

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Committee Member

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Committee Member

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father,  
Carl Bull Custis--the finest man I have ever known or  
shall ever hope to know.

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## Preface

Henry Wise played an important role in local, state, and national affairs for forty years. He is best remembered as the Governor of Virginia who was responsible for the hanging of John Brown; however, he distinguished himself as a congressman, general, and foreign minister. I have chosen to examine and emphasize Wise's career as Minister to Brazil, 1844-1847. The first chapter of the thesis, however, will provide a biographical sketch of Henry A. Wise.

Wise was born and reared in my native county, Accomack. Although a man of great achievements, he is not well known in the county today. I have always been curious concerning the history of my area, which is long and distinguished. When I started reading about Wise, I found that very little had been written concerning his service in Brazil. In most writings dealing with Wise, the only mention of his diplomatic career concerns his attempt to abolish the illegal slave trade. The paradox of Wise, the slave owner and spokesman of slavery in the United States, and Wise, the ardent anti-slave trade American diplomat in Brazil,

interests me. It is my hope that this thesis will shed some light on Wise, the diplomat.

I intend to show that Wise's personality was not compatible with the diplomatic service. He was too straight-forward, too impatient, and probably too stubborn to be an able diplomat. He was, however, hard-working, honest, and dedicated to his country. I hope to present Wise as a man who did his best in a situation that was simply not suited to his talents.

I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of all whose aid contributed to this thesis. The staff of The Eastern Shore Public Library was most helpful in acquiring needed material. Nancy Irvin and Richard Savage diligently assisted me by their suggestions and comments. Rives and Mary Fleming's generosity and encouragement knew no bounds in providing me with a home away from home in Richmond. My family has been especially supportive in my efforts. My father, Carl Bull Custis, sparked my historical interest and has kept it kindled throughout my life. My mother, Amis Scott Custis, provided me with a sterling example of strength and self sacrifice. My aunt and uncle, Virginia and Arthur Rodgers, have assisted me in ways

too numerous to mention. My wife, Dianne Williams Custis, has provided love, encouragement, and understanding. Finally, my son, Jennings Story Custis, who is named for Henry Wise's oldest son, has provided the incentive needed to complete this work.



## CHAPTER I

### HENRY ALEXANDER WISE

Henry Wise was one of the premier leaders of the ante-bellum South. He had a long and diversified political career which spanned three tumultuous decades, 1830-1860. His friends, enemies, and acquaintances were among the most influential and important leaders of their day. Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, John Calhoun, Abel Upshur, Robert E. Lee, William Mahone, and George Meade were close friends of Henry Wise. John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay numbered among Wise's enemies, while Martin Van Buren, James Polk, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan were acquaintances of Wise. Henry A. Wise's political career ranged from congressman, to Minister to Brazil, to governor of the largest and most powerful state. The main concern of this paper is the diplomatic career of Henry Wise. The first chapter provides a biographical sketch of Wise's life. Subsequent chapters deal specifically with Wise's career as a foreign diplomat, 1843-1847.

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<sup>1</sup>Wise's wedding reception was held in Andrew Jackson's home and George Meade was his brother-in-law.

John Wise, the progenitor of the Wise family in Virginia, emigrated from England to Virginia in 1635.<sup>2</sup> Wise settled on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and began a family tradition of distinguished service. The grandson of John Wise (also named John Wise) played an important role in the affairs of the area and represented the county of Accomack as Speaker of the House of Delegates from 1794-1797.<sup>3</sup> Henry Alexander Wise, the fifth child of John Wise and his second wife, Sara Cropper, was born December 3, 1806. By the time he was six years old, Wise's mother and father were dead. His maternal grandfather, John Cropper, was appointed guardian of the young child. Cropper served with distinction under Washington in the Revolutionary War, and was one of the most respected citizens of the Eastern Shore.<sup>4</sup> Washington looked upon his trusted officer as a friend as well as a soldier, and they corresponded after the war.<sup>5</sup>

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2

Barton Haxall Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia (New York: Macmillan Company, 1899), p. 3.

3

Ibid., p. 6.

4

Barton Haxall Wise, Memoir of General John Cropper (Onancock: Eastern Shore of Virginia Historical Society, 1974), p. 7.

5

Ibid., p. 33.

For two years Wise lived at Cropper's home, Bowman's Folly. The majestic house was located on the sea side portion of the Virginia peninsula. The area provided many challenges for an inquisitive boy and Wise responded to each. Cropper used to say that most of his sons and grandsons would make fine gentlemen, but he predicted that Henry Wise would most certainly be hanged.<sup>6</sup>

At the age of eight Wise left Bowman's Folly and went to live with his aunt, Mary Outten, who lived at Clifton, a Wise family plantation which was located on Chesconnessex Creek. The estate was eight miles west of Bowman's Folly and just a short distance from the Chesapeake Bay. The area offered young Wise ample opportunity for outdoor sport and recreation. Wise received his early education from Margaret Academy, a small private school which his grandfather, John Cropper, had helped found. Here Wise learned "more mischief than Latin and Greek" and his family decided to send him to college "for the improvement of his health as well as of his mind and morals."<sup>7</sup> His family, following the advice of one of Wise's teachers at

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6

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 13.

7

Ibid., p. 17.

Margaret Academy, sent the reluctant young man to  
 Washington College in Pennsylvania.<sup>8</sup> Wise found the  
 environment of Washington College to his liking and  
 maintained an excellent academic record.

After graduating with honors, Wise attended the  
 law school of Judge Henry St. George Tucker.<sup>9</sup> Wise  
 proved to be an excellent student and, after graduating,  
 returned to Accomack to begin his practice. His stay in  
 Accomack proved to be brief for, in 1828, Wise moved his  
 practice to Nashville, Tennessee. While in college,  
 Wise had attended the local Presbyterian Church, thus  
 becoming acquainted with the pastor, Obediah Jennings,  
 and his family. Wise became particularly interested in  
 Jennings' daughter, Ann. When Wise learned that Rev.  
 Obediah Jennings had been appointed pastor of the  
 Presbyterian Church of Nashville, he began to make  
 arrangements to move.<sup>10</sup>

In October, 1828, less than a month after Wise's  
 arrival in Nashville, Ann Jennings became his bride.  
 The most famous resident of Nashville, Andrew Jackson,

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<sup>8</sup>  
 Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jennings Cropper Wise, Col. John Wise His  
 Ancestors and Descendants (Richmond: Virginia Historical  
 Society, 1918), p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

was a parishioner of Rev. Jennings. Jackson, showing his respect for Reverend Jennings, insisted that Wise and his bride spend their honeymoon at the Hermitage.<sup>11</sup> Wise's relationship with Jackson was enhanced by the fact that Mrs. Jackson's family originated from Accomack County.<sup>12</sup> Wise became an admirer of Jackson and described himself as a "hot, whole hog Jackson man."<sup>13</sup>

In 1830, Wise's desire to return to his native state caused him to leave his successful practice in Nashville and return to Accomack. His practice thrived and his interest in politics increased. According to Barton Wise, Wise's grandson and biographer, "His ready faculty of making friends and his kinship with many of the leading families of the county caused him to attain a high degree of popularity while yet a young man."<sup>14</sup>

In 1832, Wise chose to challenge incumbent Richard Coke's seat in Congress. The district which Wise and Coke sought to represent was composed of the counties of York, Gloucester, Mathews, Warwick, James City, Accomack,

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<sup>11</sup> Henry A. Wise, Seven Decades of the Union (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1881), p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 32.

and Northampton. The chief issue in the campaign was nullification. His opponent, Coke, espoused the nullification doctrine, which Wise opposed. The campaign was bitterly contested and their joint debates often ended  
 15  
 in heated arguments. Wise, thanks largely to a heavy voter turnout on the Eastern Shore, narrowly defeated  
 16  
 the incumbent. Coke, believing his character had been unjustly criticized by Wise during the campaign, challenged his opponent to a duel. In the ensuing duel, Coke was wounded, but Wise escaped unharmed. The duel resolved the differences between the two as afterwards Coke voted for Wise and also visited him at his home in  
 17  
 Accomack.

In December 1833, Wise took his seat as a member of the twenty-third Congress. Wise had been elected as a Jacksonian Democrat and had strongly supported Jackson in the election of 1832. However, when Jackson removed the government deposits from the Second National Bank, Wise "joined the Whigs and became as violent in

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15

James P. Hambleton, A Biographical Sketch of Henry Wise with a History of the Political Campaign in Virginia in 1855 (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1856), p. xviii.

16

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 39.

17

Ibid., pp. 40-41.

castigating Jackson as formerly he had been ardent in  
 18  
 supporting him."

During his first session in Congress, Wise was appointed to the Committee on Naval Affairs. Wise became a strong advocate of a powerful Navy and eventually became chairman of the committee. In 1842 Wise introduced a bill which called for the construction of an ironclad vessel. The bill was passed and construction of the vessel started; however, complications ensued and  
 19  
 the project was never completed. Throughout his career in Congress, Wise continued his efforts on behalf of the Navy. When President Tyler's cabinet resigned, Wise was  
 20  
 offered the position of Secretary of the Navy. Wise declined Tyler's offer and the position went to Wise's friend and neighbor, Abel Parker Upshur.

Wise had little trouble in being reelected to Congress in 1834. In Congressional debates Wise distinguished himself as an excellent orator of the "old-

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18

Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 91.

19

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 64.

20

Robert Douthat Mead, "Henry A. Wise," Dictionary of American Biography, ed. by Dumas Malone, vol. X (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1936), p. 423.

fashioned, florid, denunciatory type."<sup>21</sup> In 1836, a reporter who was covering Congress observed Wise in action.

He has undoubtedly very high talents, and I have heard him, upon more than one occasion, soar into the regions of commanding eloquence. His forte lies in invective; then he becomes, to those whose party sympathies follow his own excited train of feeling, thrilling; his pale and excited face, his firm and compact head thrown back, his small bony hand clenched in the air, or with the forefinger quivering there, his eyes brilliant and fixed, his voice high yet sonorous, impress a picture too vivid to be easily erased from the mind.<sup>22</sup>

Wise, using his oratorical ability and a willingness to campaign hard, continued to be reelected and represented his district until he resigned his seat in 1844. The key issue facing Wise during most of his congressional years was slavery. The slave-holding Wise (by 1860, Wise owned 21 slaves) distinguished himself as one of the foremost champions of the South in resisting the abolitionists. Wise believed the institution of slavery to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 68.

<sup>23</sup> Craig Simpson, "Henry A. Wise", Encyclopedia of Southern History, ed. by David C. Roller and Robert W. Twyman (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p. 1351.



be vital to the economic interests of the South. He did not believe that slavery should be discussed on the floors of the House of Representatives. Wise believed such a controversial discussion "would lead to ill-will, to heart-burnings, to mutual hatreds".<sup>24</sup> In 1835, a petition calling for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia was introduced in the House. Speaking against the petition, Wise stated:

Slavery is interwoven with our very political existence, is guaranteed by our Constitution, and its consequences must be borne with by our Northern brothers, as resulting from our system of government; and they cannot attack the institution of slavery without attacking the institutions of the country, our safety and welfare...I say it not in passing, but calmly and dispassionately, that Congress has no right to abolish slavery even here against the consent of the slaveholders, who are not represented; and I warn gentlemen, that the South--I speak for all as strongly as one man can speak for many, for millions--that the South will fight to the hilt against the  
abolition of slavery in this District. 25

The abolition petition was defeated, however, discussions of abolition continued. In December, 1837, another abolition petition was introduced to the House.

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<sup>24</sup>

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Henry A. Wise, speech in the House of Representatives, February 16, 1835, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

requires that every step should be taken with the utmost caution and prejudice.<sup>28</sup>

Wise's role as spokesman of the southern interests in Congress brought him in direct conflict with the chief exponent of northern viewpoints, John Quincy Adams. The major bone of contention between the two was the issue of slavery; however, their differences transcended slavery; they rarely agreed on anything. In 1840, after an Adams' anti-slavery speech, Wise delivered a six-hour speech attacking Adams as "the friend, inspirer, leader,  
29  
and general hell-hound of abolition."

In 1842, Adams, wanting a forum for a serious discussion of slavery, introduced a petition which called for the dissolution of the Union. Southerners, led by  
30  
Wise, heatedly responded. Thomas Gilmer, a member of the House from Albemarle County, Virginia, introduced a petition calling for the censure of Adams. The former president and Representative from Massachusetts, delighted

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28

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 60.

29

Henry A. Wise, speech in the House of Representatives, June 15, 1841, cited in Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 422.

30

Ibid., p. 428.

at the prospect of being the center of a controversy,  
responded:

I hope this resolution will be received and debated, and that I shall have the privilege of again addressing the House in my own defense, especially as the gentleman from Virginia (Gilmer) has thought proper to play second fiddle to his colleague from Accomack.<sup>31</sup>

The debate which followed afforded Wise an opportunity to attack Adams and his views. It took Wise two days to deliver an indictment which Adams referred to as a  
32  
"filthy invective." Wise concluded his attack with a comment on John Quincy Adams' fall from such an illustrious place in history:

That one should so have outlived his fame! ...I thank God that the gentleman, great as he was, neither has nor is likely to have sufficient influence to excite a spirit of disunion throughout the land... The gentleman is politically dead; dead as Burr--dead as Arnold. The people will look upon him with wonder, will shudder, and retire.<sup>33</sup>

Adams totally disagreed with Wise's political

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31

John Quincy Adams, speech in the House of Representatives, January 25, 1842, cited in Ibid.

32

Henry A. Wise, speech in the House of Representatives, January 25, 26, 1842, cited in *ibid.*, p. 132.

33

*Ibid.*

philosophy; nevertheless, he respected Wise as an astute politician and spellbinding orator. In 1838, after a six-hour speech by Wise condemning the Van Buren administration, Adams wrote in his diary, "The speech was the most powerful and unanswerable attack upon the administration that has ever been made in Congress."<sup>34</sup> Wise in turn had mutual respect for Adams. While campaigning for governor of Virginia in 1855, Wise stated,

I have had a very severe training in collision with the acutest, the astutest, the archest enemy of southern slavery that ever existed, I mean the "Old Man Eloquent," John Quincy Adams. I must have been a dull boy indeed if I had not learned my lessons thoroughly in the subject and let me tell you that again and again I had reason to know and to feel the wisdom and sagacity of that departed man.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the low point of Wise's Congressional career was his involvement in the Graves-Cilley duel. William J. Graves was a member of the House of Representatives from Kentucky and Jonathan Cilley was a prominent Democratic Congressman from Maine. Although the differences between the two seemed to be trivial, their problems could not be resolved. Henry Wise, although not

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34

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 67.

35

Cited in Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union, p. 434.

a close personal friend of either party, served as a second for Cilley. The duel which took place in February, 1838, resulted in Cilley's death. The fact that Cilley was killed on the third exchange of shots bothered many. John Quincy Adams believed, as did other northern Congressmen, that Wise encouraged the third exchange and thus was responsible for Cilley's death. <sup>36</sup>

Wise vehemently denied that he was the instigator in the affair. <sup>37</sup> The immediate result of the duel was the

passage of an anti-dueling law. Adams championed the bill in the House; however, Wise did not speak or vote on the bill. <sup>38</sup>

In 1842, Adams, in a speech before the House of Representatives, recalled that Wise, after the Graves-Cilley duel, "came into this House with hands dripping with human gore, and a blotch of human blood upon his face." <sup>39</sup> Wise, not to be outdone by Adams,

responded, "I now pronounce the charge made by the

36

Ibid., p. 437.

37

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 82.

38

Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union, p. 378.

39

John Quincy Adams, speech in the House of Representatives, February 2, 1842, quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 86.

gentleman from Massachusetts as base and black a lie as  
 the traitor was black and base who uttered it." Henry  
 Clay played a prominent back seat role in the Graves-  
 Cilley duel. Wise attempted to divert some of the blame  
 by urging Clay to make public his role in the affair.  
 Clay publicly acknowledged his role in the duel; however,  
 this ended heretofore good relations between Wise and  
 Clay.

Despite his disagreements with Clay, Wise maintained  
 his influence in the Whig party and was one of the lead-  
 ing figures at the Whig convention in 1839. He was  
 instrumental in securing the vice-presidential nomina-  
 tion for his friend, John Tyler. In the ensuing  
 election Wise campaigned tirelessly, speaking to crowds  
 as far north as Poughkeepsie, New York. Addressing a  
 gathering of Whigs outside Philadelphia, Wise uttered  
 the sentiment "The union of the Whigs for the sake of  
 the Union." The statement caught on and became a

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Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union, p. 434.

41

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 86.

42

Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 94.

43

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 91.

44

Quoted in Jennings Cropper Wise, Col John Wise, p. 175.

campaign slogan for the Whig party. The election and subsequent death of William Henry Harrison put John Tyler, Wise's close friend, in the White House.

President Tyler vetoed the Whig-supported national bank, thus causing a split in the party. Wise had campaigned against the bank and thus supported the beleaguered President. Wise then became Tyler's main spokesman in the House of Representatives. Henry Clay contemptuously referred to Tyler's small band of supporters as the President's "Corporal's Guard". Wise considered himself to be "Captain of that distinguished guard". President Tyler greatly appreciated the sacrifices made by the "Corporal's Guard". Years later he referred to them as those who had stuck with him "when I had to sustain the combined assaults of the ultras of both parties".

In 1843, President Tyler, showing his appreciation of Wise's loyalty, appointed Wise as Minister to France.

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45

Robert Seager, II, and Tyler too (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), p. 139.

46

Clement Eaton, Mind of the South, p. 94.

47

Robert Seager, II, and Tyler too, p. 152.

48

Henry A. Wise, Seven Decades of the Union, p. 206.

49

Quoted in Robert Seager, II, and Tyler too, p. 170.

The Senate rejected Wise's appointment, whereupon  
President Tyler renominated Wise:

In submitting the name of Henry A. Wise to the Senate for the mission to France, I was led to do so by consideration of his high talent, his exalted character, and great moral worth. The country, I feel assured, would be represented at Paris in the person of Mr. Wise by one wholly unsurpassed in exalted patriotism and well fitted to be the representative of his country abroad. His rejection by the Senate has caused me to reconsider his qualifications, and I see no cause to doubt that he is eminently qualified for the station. I feel it, therefore, to be my duty to renominate him.<sup>50</sup>

The Senate once again rejected Wise's appointment. Tyler would not back off in his attempt to secure an appointment for Wise, and submitted Wise's name as Minister to Brazil. Wise received support in the Senate from Virginian William W. Archer and his appointment was  
51  
accepted.

Before Wise departed for Brazil, the most tragic event of Tyler's administration occurred. On February 28,

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50

J. D. Richardson, ed. Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897, 53rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1907, House Miscellaneous Document No. 210 pts. 1-10, 10 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), 5:2086.

51

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 105.



1844, President Tyler, Secretary of State Abel Parker Upshur, and various dignitaries embarked on a gala excursion on the newly commissioned warship, Princeton.

A tragic explosion occurred which resulted in the death  
52

of eight men. Two of Wise's close friends, Secretary of State Upshur and Secretary of the Navy Thomas Gilmer, were among the dead. Wise looked upon Upshur's death as

a critical loss for the South. Upshur, after much hard  
53  
work, had paved the way for the annexation of Texas.

Fearing Upshur's death would doom Texas annexation, Wise, acting without Tyler's approval offered the vacant

54  
position to John C. Calhoun. When Wise reported his actions to Tyler, the President exploded with anger,

"You are the most extraordinary man I ever saw! The most  
55

willful and wayward, the most incorrigible". Wise

replied that if Tyler refused to accept Calhoun, their

friendship would be over. Tyler acquiesced and accepted

52

Claude H. Hall, Abel Parker Upshur (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963), pp. 210-211.

53

Ibid., p. 209.

54

Robert Seager, II, and Tyler too, p. 217.

55

Quoted in Ibid.

a Secretary of State he clearly did not want.<sup>56</sup>

In May, 1844, Wise left the United States to begin his three-year diplomatic service in Brazil. Although he distinguished himself as an honest and hard working servant of his country, Wise's zeal and lack of tact caused him to become unpopular with the Brazilian government, which requested his recall. In 1847, Wise returned to the United States, however, upon his own  
57  
initiative.

Upon his return from Brazil, Wise purchased a farm near the town of Onancock. He resumed his law practice  
58  
and announced that he was retiring from politics. Wise enjoyed a successful practice especially in criminal trials, and according to Barton Wise, "The witchery of Wise's words often blinded, not only the jury, but also all who heard him, to everything in the case,  
59  
except what he wished them to see."

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Randolph G. Adams, "Abel Parker Upshur", p. 128, American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy, ed. by Samuel Flagg Bemis, vol. V (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 128

57

Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 94.

58

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 120.

59

Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Wise came out of his political retirement to run as a candidate to the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1850. The key question was the unequal representation in the General Assembly for the western areas of Virginia. Wise believed the western areas were entitled to more equal representation and strongly supported the western viewpoint in this issue. Wise's opinion on this issue did not reflect the view of his constituents. A tribute to Wise's personal popularity was his selection as one of the two candidates from the Eastern Shore. Wise considered his victory in this election to be the greatest victory of his political career.

60

At the convention, Wise was one of the few delegates from eastern Virginia who had the courage to rise above sectional interests and vote for the democratic reforms demanded by the residents of western Virginia. Wise's power as an orator was exemplified by the attention which his speeches received. Delivering an impassioned speech, Wise called for equal representation for all Virginians. The speech lasted five days and the galleries and aisles remained crowded throughout the speech. Wise

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60

Ibid., p. 146.

61

Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 95.

closed by saying:

Give us an united people with one affection, one interest, one feeling, and one impulse. If any people upon the face of God's earth ought to be inspired by the recollection and glories of the past, it is Virginia; for she has more than Greece or Rome to inspire her. With the glory of the past inspire her, what might she not achieve? Give me for the people of Virginia free and universal representation for our people, and who can foretell our destiny?<sup>62</sup>

After the Constitutional Convention, Wise attempted to strengthen his support in the Democratic party. Elected to the Democratic Convention in 1852, Wise played an important part in transferring the support of the Virginia delegation to Franklin Pierce, thus helping to secure his nomination. During the ensuing campaign, Wise thoroughly canvassed eastern Virginia on behalf of the Democratic party. A grateful President Pierce offered Wise his choice of Cabinet positions; however Wise once again declined a cabinet job.

In 1854, despite the personal misgivings of some Democratic leaders, Wise was selected as his party's

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62

Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 150.

63

Ibid., p. 164.

64

David R. Goldfield, "Marketing of a Candidate", Virginia Calvacade, vol. xxvi no. 1 (Summer, 1976), p. 32.

65

Robert Seager, II, and Tyler too, p. 402.

candidate for governor. Virginia's reform Constitution of 1851 had greatly increased the eligible electorate of Virginia. According to Professor David Goldfield, "The Democratic convention selected the individual who best could reach the new electorate; the campaign underscored the wisdom of that choice."<sup>66</sup>

Wise broke political tradition by deciding to carry his campaign personally to the voters of Virginia. This was a unique decision, since most candidates rarely traveled outside their districts to speak. In the first fifty days of his campaign, Wise "delivered more than seventy-five hours of oratory in twenty-one speeches, and by the end of his eastern circuit Wise's reputation as an orator had grown to legend, as his opponents warned each other not to listen lest they be converted."<sup>67</sup> Ex-Governor William E. Cameron described Wise during the campaign:

The model of a campaign speaker and a master of invective, Wise was in every way fitted to strike terror to the heart of the members of the new secret order, and from the Chesapeake to the banks of the Ohio and to the Tennessee line, he canvassed the state, delivering

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66

David R. Goldfield, "Marketing of a Candidate", p.32.

67

Ibid.

speeches of impassioned eloquence and convincing logic. Everywhere enormous crowds greeted him with unbounded enthusiasm and people rode on horseback fifty miles across the mountains to hear him.<sup>68</sup>

The main issue of the campaign had nothing to do with state concerns; it was a struggle to prevent the Know-Nothing party from gaining power in Virginia.<sup>69</sup> Thomas Flournoy of Halifax was chosen as the Know-Nothing candidate. In accordance with the philosophy of his party, Flournoy did not campaign but rather relied on the press to spread his message. Wise was bitterly opposed to the Know-Nothing doctrines, particularly their anti-Catholic stand. In one speech, after he traced a brief history of several important Catholic leaders, Wise concluded:

I come here not to praise the Catholics, but I come here to acknowledge historical truth, and to ask of Protestants what has heretofore been the pride and boast of Protestants--tolerance of opinion in religious faith. All we ask is tolerance. All we ask is, that if you hate the Catholics because they have nunneries and monasteries and jesuitical secret orders, don't out-jesuit the jesuits by going into dark-

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68

Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p.174.

69

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 97.

lantern secret chambers to apply test oaths. If you hate the Catholics because you say they encourage the Machiavellian expediency of telling lies sometimes, don't swear yourselves not tell the truth.<sup>70</sup>

In his speeches Wise misrepresented the Know-Nothing party as the party of abolition. It was easy for Wise to convince the voters that the Know-Nothings were abolitionists since many of the prominent leaders of the party in New England were anti-slavery men. Wise portrayed the Democratic party as the only hope for slave-owning Virginians. In referring to the Know-Nothing party Wise stated:

Tell them distinctly there shall be no compromise, no parley. I will come to no terms. They shall either crush me or I will crush them in this state.<sup>71</sup>

Wise emphasized the need for reform and progress in Virginia. He called for improvements in canals and railroads, encouragement of manufacturing, and an improved educational system. Wise proposed to "coordinate the state public works into a unified system and to establish a free public school system and a

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Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p.194.

71

Quoted in Ibid., p. 196.

number of technical schools."<sup>72</sup> Wise termed Virginia's educational system a "monkey" and, in an unusual campaign practice, he promised to "tax, tax, tax" to develop a public school system.<sup>73</sup>

The election was a stunning victory for the Democratic party. Wise defeated Flournoy by ten thousand votes. The victory decisively checked the advance of the Know-Nothing party in the South.<sup>74</sup> Wise said of his election, "I have met the Black Knight with his visor down, his shield and lance are broken. He might live in the land of the secret ballot, but he could not survive the viva voce of the people."<sup>75</sup>

The size of Wise's victory was enough to bring his name prominently before the South as a possible candidate for the presidency in 1856.<sup>76</sup> At the Democratic convention, Wise planned to have the Virginia delegation support James Buchanan, and if the latter could not gain

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<sup>72</sup>

Jack P. Maddex, Jr., The Virginia Conservatives, 1867-1879 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970), p. 18.

<sup>73</sup>

David R. Goldfield, "Marketing of a Candidate", p. 32.

<sup>74</sup>

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 97.

<sup>75</sup>

Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 203.

<sup>76</sup>

Robert Seager, II, and Tyler too, p. 409.



the nomination, Wise's supporters were to present his  
 77  
 name. However, Buchanan received the nomination and  
 78  
 Wise campaigned for his election.

Wise also had problems within the Democratic party  
 as a battle for leadership developed between Senator  
 R. M. T. Hunter and himself. In this contest, Wise had  
 the distinct disadvantage of having changed party  
 79  
 allegiance several times. When Wise recommended re-  
 form legislation to the General Assembly, Hunter's  
 80  
 supporters prevented its enactment. The feud between  
 Wise and Hunter dominated Democratic party politics  
 81  
 during Wise's term as governor. Hunter emerged as the  
 eventual victor when the Virginia delegation supported  
 him instead of Wise as its presidential candidate in  
 82  
 1860.

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77

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 99.

78

Henry Wise, Seven Decades of the Union, p. 245.

79

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 98.

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Jack Maddex, Jr., The Virginia Conservatives, p.18.

81

Henry T. Shanks, The Secession Movement in Virginia  
 1847-1861 (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), p. 46.

82

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 101.

As governor, Wise attempted to fulfill his campaign promises in the area of education. Wise was the dominant factor in statewide educational conventions held in Richmond in 1856 and 1857.<sup>83</sup> The governor criticized the old educational system because it did not provide for the training of teachers and did not provide public financial support.<sup>84</sup> Wise declared that "schools should not be a state charity, but the chief element of the freedom of the state."<sup>85</sup> The governor requested that the General Assembly appropriate \$250,000 for schools, however, the request was denied.<sup>86</sup> Wise, believing the state owed a duty to provide opportunities for children of the poor, called for free public schools.<sup>87</sup> Although Wise's educational goals were not fully realized, some interest was generated. However, the momentum generated in Virginia on behalf of a publicly financed system of education was halted by the Civil War.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Virginius Dabney, Virginia the New Dominion (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1971), p. 250.

<sup>84</sup> Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 104.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Virginius Dabney, Virginia the New Dominion, p. 250.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 104.

<sup>88</sup> Virginius Dabney, Virginia the New Dominion, p. 250.

In addition to his attempts to provide an adequate free school system for Virginia, Wise attempted to obtain internal improvements. In order to obtain revenue for his internal improvements, Wise advocated a tax on oysters. In another effort to raise money, Wise made a revolutionary proposal that the state enter into the insurance business. Despite Wise's vigorous efforts to revive Virginia, little was accomplished. According to Clement Eaton, "the oyster tax was not enacted into law; the public schools were neglected; the insurance scheme was not adopted; an agricultural and mechanical college was not established." The over-<sup>89</sup>shadowing influence of slavery had a lot to do with Wise's failures. Much of his time and energy was spent in defending the institution of slavery against Northern attacks. Clement Eaton wrote, "Wise intensely resented Northern interference with slavery in the Southern states, and both in Congress and in the governor's office he conceived of himself in the heroic role of  
90  
'Defender of the South'."

As governor, Wise is best remembered for his hand-

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89

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 106.

90

Ibid., p. 107.

ling of the John Brown raid. After learning of the raid, Wise immediately went to Harper's Ferry; however, Brown was captured by federal troops prior to the governor's arrival. Chagrined by the fact that federal troops and not the state militia had captured Brown, Wise remarked upon returning to Richmond that he "would have given his arm to his shoulder if Virginia's troops had captured  
 91  
 John Brown." Wise originally planned to have Brown examined by a doctor to determine his sanity, but  
 92  
 changed his mind. The governor believed Brown to be sane and reported to the Virginia militia in Richmond:

They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman. He is a bundle of the best nerves I ever saw cut and thrust and bleeding and in bonds. He is a man of clear head, of courage, fortitude, and simple ingenuousness. He is cool, collected and indomitable; and it is but just to him to say that he was humane to his prisoners, as attested to me by Colonel Washington and Mr. Mills, and he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth. He is a fanatic, vain and garrulous; but firm, truthful, and intelligent.<sup>93</sup>

In his handling of John Brown, Wise steadfastly

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91

Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 100.

92

Virginus Dabney, Virginia the New Dominion, p.287.

93

Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p.246.

refused to allow Brown to be tried in federal courts.

Convicted of treason and murder in Circuit Court, Brown was sentenced to die. The trial had been remarkably fair, causing Brown to remark, "I feel entirely satisfied with the treatment I have received on my trial."<sup>94</sup>

The governor was under severe pressure, particularly from the North to pardon Brown. Wise received over five hundred letters "threatening or advising him to free

Brown."<sup>95</sup> After Brown's execution Wise addressed the state legislature:

There was no middle ground of mitigation. To pardon or reprieve at all was to proclaim a licensed impunity to the thousand fanatics who are made only in the guilt and folly of setting up their individual supremacy over law, life, property, and civil liberty itself. This sympathy with the leader was worse than the invasion itself.<sup>96</sup>

As bad feelings began to increase between the North and South, Wise urged Virginians to adopt his idea of "fighting in the Union."<sup>97</sup> Eventually this plan seemed

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94

Quoted in John Wise, The End of an Era (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1927), p. 131.

95

Henry Shanks, The Secession Movement in Virginia, p. 87.

<sup>96</sup>Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p.254.

<sup>97</sup>Henry Shanks, The Secession Movement in Virginia, p. 125.

impractical and Wise became a fiery advocate of

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secession. Wise was elected to the Virginia Conven-

tion in 1861 and was influential in the passage of the

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ordinance of secession. During the Civil War Wise

did not serve in the government of the Confederacy where

he would have been most successful; rather, he served as

100

a brigadier general.

Wise's first assignment was in western Virginia.

He did not get along well with other Confederate officers

in the area and Jefferson Davis sent Robert E. Lee to

iron out the differences among the officers. Lee's

efforts proved futile and he received the blame when

many of Virginia's western counties went over to the

101

enemy. After some minor engagements in western

Virginia, Wise was ordered to assume command of the

forces defending the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

Wise immediately recognized that his force was much

too small to adequately defend the area; however, he was

98

Ibid.

99

Ibid., p. 203.

100

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 102.

101

Virginus Dabney, Virginia the New Dominion, p.309.

unsuccessful in persuading Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin that additional help was essential. General Ambrose Burnside, with "the first amphibian force used on the western continent," landed a vastly superior Union army. The battle which followed was a disastrous defeat for Wise's greatly outnumbered troops. Wise suffered a double loss in that his oldest son, O. Jennings Wise, commander of the Richmond Light Infantry Blues, was killed. After the defeat Wise requested the Confederate Congress to investigate the defeat at Roanoke Island. The report issued by the Confederate Congress exonerated Wise from all responsibility for the defeat and attributed the failure to Wise's superior, General Huger, and Secretary of War Benjamin.

Wise lacked military experience but not courage or dedication. Wise's military career has been severely questioned by historians. Many agree with Clement Eaton's assessment that "Wise was a failure as an officer." However, Wise was certainly a courageous

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102

Virginus Dabney, Richmond: Story of a City (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 167.

103

Virginus Dabney, Virginia the New Dominion, p. 309.

104

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 313.

105

Clement Eaton, Mind of the Old South, p. 102.

officer who remained dedicated to the Southern cause.

Douglas Southall Freeman credits Wise and his troops  
for saving Petersburg during the Battle of the Crater. 106

General Lee rewarded Wise's courage after the Battle of  
Sailor's Creek by promoting him to the rank of major-  
107

general. Just prior to his surrender, Robert E. Lee  
told Wise's son, John, "Your father's command has borne  
itself nobly throughout this retreat. You may well feel

108  
proud of him and of it." Wise was also fondly  
remembered by General Fitzhugh Lee who wrote in his  
final report:

The past services of General Henry A. Wise, his antecedents in civil life, and his age, caused his bearing upon this most trying retreat to shine conspicuously forth. His unconquerable spirit was filled with as much earnestness and zeal in April, 1865, as when he first took up arms four years ago, and the freedom with which he exposed a long life laden with honors proved he was willing to sacrifice it, if it would conduce toward attaining the liberty of his country. 109

After Lee's surrender, Wise was greatly aided by

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106

Douglas Southall Freeman, R. E. Lee, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), p. 470.

107

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 366.

108

Quoted in John Wise, End of an Era, p. 430.

109

Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 365.



his brother-in-law, General George Meade, who used his influence to obtain for Wise an ambulance, a pair of mules, and supplies. <sup>110</sup> Wise could not return to his Norfolk plantation (he had taken up residence in Norfolk after he left the governor's mansion) since the Freedmen's Bureau was occupying his land. <sup>111</sup> Eventually settling in Richmond, Wise resumed his practice of law. He did not attempt to return to public life; many fellow citizens "regarded him as a relic of a departed era." <sup>112</sup> Wise refused to ask for amnesty and could not understand why his Confederate comrades-in-arms would do so. <sup>113</sup> He believed that it was "not amnesty, but damn nasty." <sup>114</sup> Wise had an abiding faith in the principles for which the South had fought. Just prior to his death in 1876, Wise told his son, John, "Try to be worthy of man's highest estate--have high, noble, manly honor. There is but one true test of anything, and that is, is it right. If it isn't, turn right away from it." <sup>115</sup>

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110

Ibid., p. 368.

111

Jack Maddex, The Virginia Conservatives, p. 3.

112

Ibid.

113

Ibid.

114

Quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p.377.

115

Quoted in Ibid., p. 422.

## CHAPTER II

### WISE'S ARRIVAL AND THE ANNEXATION OF TEXAS

The selection of Henry A. Wise as Minister to Brazil was entirely political. During the 1842-43 congressional session, Wise's health declined.<sup>1</sup> He and his family felt a change in the climate might be beneficial. Wise's selection as a diplomat would enable him to remain active in politics while attempting to look after his health. A close relationship with President Tyler assured Wise of his choice of diplomacy. His departure was delayed when the Senate rejected his appointment as Minister to France. Henry Clay and the other Whigs who were antagonized by Wise's support of President Tyler, led the way in rejecting Wise's appointment; however, President Tyler persisted and the Senate approved of Wise's appointment as Minister to Brazil.<sup>2</sup> In May 1844, Wise, his wife, five children,

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1

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 102.

2

Ibid.

and several slaves boarded the Constitution and sailed  
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from New York.

After a pleasant voyage of 62 days, during which  
brief stops were made at Orto in Fayal, at Funchal in  
Maderira, and at Santa Cruz in Teneriffe, the  
Constitution arrived at Rio de Janeiro on August 2,  
4  
1844. Several days later Wise was cordially received  
by the Emperor Don Pedro II. Although the Emperor was  
only eighteen years of age, the government had declared  
his majority four years previously to prevent his  
sister, Princess Donna Januaria, from occupying the  
5  
throne.

The Emperor's father, Don Pedro, had been forced  
to abdicate in 1832. Unlike his father, Don Pedro II  
had been born and educated in Brazil and was totally  
Brazilian. His tutors provided him with an enlightened  
education, for "they were sworn to mold the perfect  
6  
Emperor." Although Don Pedro II was not as pompous  
and ceremonious as his father, he was still too formal

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3

Ibid., p. 108.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6

Donald E. Worcester, Brazil (New York: Charles  
Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 97.

for the new American minister who had been born and raised in a remote rural setting. The etiquette and social observances of the Imperial Court had little charm for the cantankerous Virginian. Wise, expressing his dislike for court etiquette, stated, "The only reward for waiting hours on a hot day, in a hot uniform, is to make three bows forward and three bows backward and then bob out of the Imperial presence."<sup>7</sup>

The claims of American citizens, prize cases, questions arising in connection with the construction of treaties, and arrangement of tariff schedules were all day-to-day concerns of Wise; however, four events occupied most of his time and energy during the three years of his mission. Most of Wise's correspondence deals with one or the other of these diplomatic situations: the dispute with Mexico over Texas, the conflict between Argentina and Britain and France in the La Plata River area, the illegal slave trade in Brazil, and the Columbia affair. It is interesting to note that the British were involved in all of the major diplomatic situations except the Columbia affair.

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7

Quoted in Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 109.

George H. Proffit, of Indiana, was commissioned envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary on June 7, 1843. Secretary of State Abel Parker Upshur issued instructions to Proffit in an August 1, 1843, dispatch.<sup>8</sup> The Senate, however, did not confirm Proffit's appointment. Secretary of State Calhoun referred Wise to Proffit's instructions and then in a letter dated May 25, 1844, added some of his own.<sup>9</sup> The importance of the Brazilian mission was stressed to Wise. Secretary of State Calhoun considered Brazil to be second only to the United States in the Western Hemisphere in wealth and power.<sup>10</sup> The new minister was instructed to impress upon the government of Brazil the danger of not opposing British and French intervention in Mexico and South America.<sup>11</sup> The United States government was strongly opposing British attempts to have slavery abolished in the Americas. The United

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John C. Calhoun to Henry A. Wise, May 25, 1844, William R. Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States, Vol. 2: Bolivia and Brazil (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1932), p. 126.

9

John C. Calhoun to Henry A. Wise, May 25, 1844, *Ibid.*, p. 127.

10

*Ibid.*

11

John C. Calhoun to Henry A. Wise, May 25, 1844, Manning, p. 126.

States generally assumed that the British motive for abolishing slavery was to destroy the competition of slave labor with the rest of her colonies in sugar, cotton, and rice.<sup>12</sup> Wise was instructed to impress upon the Brazilian government how similar Brazil was to the American South. Alike as these two areas were, it would be in the best interests of both to oppose British intentions.<sup>13</sup> The instructions cautioned the new minister concerning the diplomatic skill of the British minister to Brazil, Hamilton Hamilton. Not only had he been given an extremely large expense account, but he was also said to be a man of great skill in diplomacy, or extensive information and of the most liberal and magnificent hospitalities.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to using his office to oppose British intervention in the Western Hemisphere, Wise was instructed to inform the Brazilian government of the United States policy in reference to Texas. At this time the United States Senate was in the process of

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12

Ibid., p. 125.

13

John C. Calhoun to Henry A. Wise, May 25, 1844, Manning, p. 127.

14

Abel Parker Upshur to George H. Proffit, August 7, 1843, Manning, p. 124.

considering the annexation of Texas. Wise was instructed to inform the Brazilian government that the United States had no intention of angering Mexico. In fact, the United States desired "to cultivate the most friendly relations" with all its neighbors to the south and  
 15  
 "none more than Brazil."

After installing his family in a residence in Rio de Janeiro, Wise tirelessly tackled the work of his mission. Although Wise did not speak Portuguese, he had little trouble in conducting the business of his office. He was greatly assisted by his wife, an accomplished  
 16  
 linguist. Wise felt that his predecessors had neglected their duty. In 1855, Wise wrote a letter to J. P. Hambleton, who was preparing a biography of the newly elected Virginia governor:

I found the archives of the legation neglected and had to restore them. I nearly killed the Secretary of the legation by over tasking his powers in transcribing. I found the entire consular system out of order and had to reduce it to regular responsibilities. I found our old and new claims against the government of Brazil not urged for

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15

Henry A. Wise to Ernesto Franca, September 24, 1844, Manning, pp. 256-257.

16

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 109.

years and hastily abandoned. I found the African slave trade actively carried on in Yankee vessils (sic) from north of Mason and Dixon's line. I found our citizens subject to many personal oppressions and I had to protect them.<sup>17</sup>

Wise had very definite feelings about what course the United States should pursue in relationship to Texas. While serving the House of Representatives, Wise supported the annexation of the Texas Republic.<sup>18</sup> Prior to his departure to Brazil, Wise's long-time friend, Secretary of State Abel Parker Upshur, had paved the way for the annexation of the Texas Republic.<sup>19</sup> Upshur's untimely death seriously jeopardized plans for annexation. Wise believed the annexation of the Texas Republic to be of crucial importance and felt that the new Secretary of State must share his feelings.<sup>20</sup> Wise believed that the Texas question must be placed in "safe Southern hands," and thus a logical successor to Upshur would be John C. Calhoun.<sup>21</sup> The importance with which he viewed this

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<sup>17</sup>

Henry A. Wise to James P. Hambleton, 1855, Henry Wise Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union, p. 451.

<sup>19</sup> Claude H. Hall, Abel Parker Upshur, p. 209.

<sup>20</sup> Henry A. Wise, Seven Decades of the Union, p. 221.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



issue is illustrated by the fact that Wise risked his friendship with President Tyler by tendering an unauthorized offer to Calhoun. On February 29, 1844, one day after Upshur's tragic death, Wise urged Senator George McDuffe of South Carolina to write Calhoun and beg him to accept the position of Secretary of State. Although astonished and angered by Wise's action, President Tyler, nevertheless, yielded and accepted a man he did not want.

Wise believed he was aiding annexation by his selection of Calhoun; however, his action proved to do more harm than good. Calhoun was so closely associated with the South and slavery that his appointment alienated thousands of northerners who might have otherwise welcomed annexation. Upshur had secured enough votes for annexation in the Senate; however, after the appointment of Calhoun, northern and western senators refused to vote for annexation and in June the treaty was rejected 35 to 16.

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22

Randolph G. Adams, "Abel Parker Upshur", American Secretaries of State, ed., by Bemis, pp. 127-128.

23

John A. Garraty, The American Nation (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 312.

24

Ibid.

Wise's strong affinity for the Texas Republic was shared by many of his southern countrymen. They viewed the Texas Republic as a key to the future of slavery. If the Texas Republic abolished slavery, then a free territory would exist in close proximity to the South. Slaves could find a haven in the free land of the Texas Republic and escape attempts would increase. As a slaveowner and spokesman for slavery while in Congress, Wise saw that the future of slavery might rest on the  
 25  
 Texas Republic.

Included in Calhoun's diplomatic instructions to Wise was a copy of the annexation treaty which had been negotiated with the Texas Republic. Wise was instructed to use his office to assure Brazil that the United States had "no feelings of disrespect or hostility to Mexico."  
 26  
 Wise was "to embrace some early and suitable occasion to explain to the Brazilian government the motives which led to the adoption of the measures at  
 27  
 this time." Wise acceded to his government's

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25

Ibid.

26

John C. Calhoun to Henry A. Wise, May 25, 1844, Manning, p. 127.

27

Ibid.

instructions and outlined his country's position in a lengthy letter to Ernesto F. Franca, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brazil. In this letter, which William R. Manning calls a "very remarkable document", Wise  
28  
thoroughly outlined his country's policy.

Wise attempted to show Franca that it would be in the best interest of not only the United States, but also Brazil, if the Texas Republic was annexed. Like the United States and Brazil, the Texas Republic was an agricultural community of great importance. If the Texas Republic remained independent, England or any other country would be able to play one set of cotton producers against the other. In referring to Texas agriculture, Wise mentioned slavery. In this matter also, Wise tried to show Franca that the institution of slavery was also in keeping with the best interests of Brazil.

That Brazil has the deepest interests in establishing the same policy especially in reference to the important relation between the European and African races as it exists with her and in the southern portion of

our Union. That under no other can the two races live together in peace and prosperity in either country. That the avowed policy of Great Britain is to destroy that relation in both countries and throughout the world that, if it should be consummated, it would destroy the peace and prosperity of both, and transfer the production of tobacco, rice, cotton, sugar, and coffee from the United States and Brazil, to her possessions beyond the Cape of Good Hope. That to destroy it in either would facilitate its destruction in the other. Hence our mutual interest in resisting her interference with the relation in either country, and hence also the importance of each country firmly opposing any attempt on the part of Great Britain to disturb the existing relations between the two races within their respective limits, and of each discount advancing any such attempts in that of the other.<sup>29</sup>

After explaining to Franca how Brazil would be aided by annexation of Texas to the United States, Wise proceeded with a historical justification of why Mexico had no rights regarding the Texas Republic. Texas, Wise wrote, was separated from Mexico by a "broad extent of desert lands" and populated by the most "war-like and hostile Indians"; therefore, Mexico offered "lures to

settlers from among the hard frontier population of the  
 United States."<sup>30</sup> According to Wise, Mexico did not  
 treat fairly the people of Texas and when they revolted,  
 the United States stood aloof from the contest, and  
 "left Mexico unmolested and unobstructed to pursue her  
 attempt to subjugate the province of Texas."<sup>31</sup> Wise  
 embellished his history with some partiality in his  
 description of the war: "the Texans--volunteers from  
 the United States and all counties--against immense  
 odds in number and discipline of troops, overwhelmed  
 the Mexicans with defeat, and entirely crushed all  
 general or regular invasion from that time to this."<sup>32</sup>

Wise spiced his letter with condemnations of Great  
 Britain. He believed "England would have subjected  
 Texas, an independent North American state, to her  
 supremacy and domination."<sup>33</sup> After divesting himself  
 of anti-English views, Wise ended his lengthy letter  
 with a comment on the recent Senate rejection of the  
 annexation of the Texas Republic. Hiding his bitterness,

Wise wrote:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

The Senate of the United States has seen fit in its wisdom to reject the treaty of annexation. It is not proper for the undersigned to discuss the reasons of its rejection; they are of a character entirely domestic to the United States. And the undersigned is not instructed to say whether negotiations for the same end will be renewed or relinquished by his government. But he may congratulate his country, at all events, if the mere attempt of this measure will have the effect to break the spell of English diplomacy over the North American Continent, and to warn all American states, North and South, of the influence still sought to be established by Europe over their destiny.<sup>34</sup>

Wise was encouraged by what he perceived to be the Brazilian response. He reported to Calhoun that it was difficult for him not to be too critical of Great Britain in his letter to Franca. Wise knew that Brazil would not oppose in any way the United States in their annexation attempt:

There is no doubt but what sympathy enough with that feeling is to be found in the Government and among the people of Brazil. Their partiality to the United States is apparent, and no less manifest is their distrust of Great Britain. Mr. Franca, Secretary of State, in my personal interview with him did

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34

Ibid., p. 267.

not withhold the expression of his approval of the measure of the treaty with Texas by the government of the United States.<sup>35</sup>

In March, 1845, just before he was due to leave office, President Tyler secured the annexation of the Texas Republic by the means of a joint resolution. Wise's assertion that Brazil would not oppose annexation must have been correct as there was no future reference to Texas in correspondence either from Rio de Janeiro or Washington. Wise's thoughts shifted direction as a conflict in the La Plata River area replaced Texas as the key diplomatic question for the American minister to Brazil to consider.

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Henry A. Wise to John C. Calhoun, October 11, 1844, Manning, p. 269.

## CHAPTER III

### THE LA PLATA CONFLICT

According to St. George Leakin Sioussat, "Excepting the mission of Wise to Brazil, the most important matter in South American affairs was that which had to do with the interference of England and France in the relations of the Argentine Republic and Uruguay."<sup>1</sup>

Wise took a keen interest in this diplomatic situation. Once again Wise warned Brazil of British and, this time, French interference in South America.

The major South American power in the La Plata area was Argentina, and the leader of the country was Juan Manuel de Rosas. The legal office which Rosas held was that of governor of the province of Buenos Aires, but he was recognized as leader of his nation. A firm nationalist, Rosas refused to recognize the independence of Paraguay, Bolivia, or Uruguay and imprisoned,

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St. George Leakin Sioussat, "John Caldwell Calhoun," American Secretaries of States and Their Diplomacy, ed. by Samuel Flagg Bemis, Vol. V., p. 215.



assassinated, or executed those who did not share his  
<sup>2</sup> views. Rosas futilely tried to intervene in the affairs  
of Uruguay, embroiling his country with England and  
<sup>3</sup> France. Blockading Montevideo, Rosas attempted to  
force Uruguay to accept his dictates. In 1845, "pro-  
voked by desire to protect their nationals, to safeguard  
their commercial interests, and to preserve Uruguay as  
a buffer state," Great Britain and France issued a  
<sup>4</sup> joint declaration of blockade of the Rio de La Plata.

The United States became directly involved in the  
La Plata region in 1844, when Captain P. F. Voorhees,  
in command of the U. S. frigate, Congress, engaged in  
a minor battle with the Argentine squadron. Captain  
Voorhees took offense when a schooner associated with  
the blockading squadron "carelessly but harmlessly  
fired a few musket shots into an American merchantman,  
<sup>5</sup> during the pursuit of a blockade runner." In retalia-  
tion, Voorhees captured first the offending vessel and

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2

J. Fred Rippy, Latin America, A Modern History (Ann  
Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1958), p. 276.

3

Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America (New  
York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 711.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Sioussat, "John Caldwell Calhoun", p. 216.

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then the entire Argentine squadron. To complete his conquest, the American captain liberated a number of captured fishing vessels and released the American citizens of the crews. Voorhees released the Argentine vessels after satisfactory explanations had been received, but he detained the offending schooner. The American captain then compounded the situation by announcing that he "would no longer permit the molestation of any North American vessel by the blockade, as long as the French and British were permitted to examine all vessels flying their flags."<sup>7</sup>

Wise took a keen interest in the events of the La Plata. He was delighted when Brazilian Foreign Minister Franca, in the course of a conversation which Wise relayed to Calhoun, posed the question, "Whether the United States would not unite with Brazil in putting an end to that war by force, if necessary, rather than permit England or France to interpose and acquire a dominant influence in the Platte [Plata] country?"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> John Cady, Foreign Intervention in the Rio de La Plata (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1929), p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> Henry A. Wise to John C. Calhoun, November 1, 1844, Manning, p. 270.

The nationalistic Wise also let Secretary of State Calhoun know of his support of the actions of Captain Voohees. "The conduct of Captain Voorhees in that affair has not only been universally approved, but is rejoiced at here." After several months passed and he did not receive any favorable word concerning Voorhees, Wise once again pleaded his case to Calhoun: "I trust our Gov. will attach no blame whatsoever to Captain Voorhees for his conduct."

The pleas for approval of the actions of Voorhees fell on deaf ears as Calhoun disavowed the conduct of the eager Captain. The unlucky Voorhees was "court-martialed and sentenced to a reprimand and suspension from the navy for three years."

The intentions of England and France in the La Plata were viewed with much skepticism by Wise. To him the conduct of the European powers was "nothing less than lust for domination cloaked under a less offensive

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Ibid.

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Henry Wise to John C. Calhoun, January 12, 1845, Manning, p. 273.

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Sioussat, "John Caldwell Calhoun", Bemis, p. 216.

12

Cady, Foreign Intervention, p. 163.

term."<sup>13</sup> Their objective, Wise perceived, was control of the trade of the interior of South America. Wise wished to guard against European domination in this area and felt the time was right for American involvement. A November, 1844, letter to Calhoun ended: "My main object is to impress the idea that a direct intimation has been made to me here, that the opportunity is now afforded for the United States to manifest a leading interest in South American affairs, and the wish is openly expressed for them to do so much to their advantage."<sup>14</sup> The importance with which Wise viewed this opportunity for American involvement can be illustrated by his personal request to his government that he be allowed to mediate in the La Plata.

I might be instructed to accompany a special agent from this court. I seek no such additional duty, but if it is thought best to adopt that mode in case any be adopted, I would cheerfully consent to take upon myself the mission. It would take but a short time, about forty days, to go down to the river, do all that could be done, and return.

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Quoted in Lawrence F. Hill, Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and Brazil, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1932), p. 106.

14

Henry A. Wise to John C. Calhoun, November 1, 1844, Manning, p. 271.

But these are mere suggestions which I submit to the better judgment of the Department.<sup>15</sup>

Wise's desire for mediation was not matched by his government and he was not sent "down the river". A new administration was about to take office and Secretary of State Calhoun was reluctant to act. In January, 1845, Wise made one last attempt to convince Calhoun of the necessity of American involvement.

An American policy is a favorite topic with those who I meet. That means with them what I would have it mean. The United States and Brazil are the two elder sisters of North and South America, and are in a moral sense responsible for the whole family of States in the new world. They urge upon me the interposition of the United States in the affairs of Montevideo and Buenos Aires,--my invariable reply is, that Brazil has precedence of friendly offices or of interposition in South America; the United States has enough to do to protect American polity in the North American Continent.<sup>16</sup>

Wise's pleas failed to move Calhoun, who decided that the new administration should inherit the La Plata  
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situation.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Henry A. Wise to John C. Calhoun, January 12, 1845, Manning, p. 273.

<sup>17</sup> Sioussat, "James Buchanan," American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy, ed., by Bemis, Vol. V., p. 313.

President James K. Polk was not at all fond of Secretary of State Calhoun and there was no question that he would be replaced.<sup>18</sup> The position was offered to, and accepted by, veteran Pennsylvania politician, James Buchanan. The impatient Wise wasted little time in stating his case to the new Secretary. In March, 1845, Wise urged a more active American policy in the La Plata.

I am pretty credibly assured that England and France will interpose in the war of the Platte /Plata/ at the instance of Brazil. The United States' interests there ought to be looked after. England is sending out a considerable fleet for this station, and our naval force here ought to be increased. I apprehend difficulties between England and this country on various subjects of difference.<sup>19</sup>

The new administration, perceiving the importance of a peaceful settlement in the La Plata area, decided to send a special agent to aid in negotiations between Rosas and Carlos Lopez, President of Paraguay.<sup>20</sup> Rosas was treating Paraguay in the same manner as he was Uruguay; he refused to recognize their independence and

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>19</sup> Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, March 28, 1845, Manning, p. 275.

<sup>20</sup> Hill, Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and Brazil, p. 107.

continued to intervene in their affairs. The special agent that Polk and Buchanan decided upon was Edward A. Hopkins of Vermont. Initially, Hopkins' mission was not connected to European intervention. Hopkins was the promoter of a commercial group which was urging the United States to recognize Paraguay and secured the free navigation of the Parana River. <sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Hopkins' instructions fitted the situation and he set sail with instructions to stop in Rio de Janeiro to seek the advice of the United States Minister. <sup>22</sup>

In April, 1845, prior to the arrival of Hopkins, Wise learned that England and France were sending representatives to meet with Rosas. <sup>23</sup> Before going to Buenos Aires, William Ouseley, the British representative, stopped in Rio de Janeiro. Wise met with Ouseley several times and questioned the British minister concerning his mission. Ouseley, seeking Wise's aid and suggestions, reported British intentions to be honorable and stated that his mission was one of

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21

Cady, Foreign Intervention, p. 172.

22

Ibid.

23

Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, May 2, 1845, Manning, p. 277.

"mediation", not "intervention".<sup>24</sup> After Ouseley departed for Buenos Aires, Wise, still somewhat skeptical of European intentions, informed Secretary of State Buchanan of his discussions and urged that the United States look out for its "equal share".<sup>25</sup> Rosas, Wise reported, was not a man who could be easily influenced and he "is undoubtedly a Gaucho, anti-commercial and opposed to foreigners and is a tyrant, but he is American in his feelings and is a man of great natural abilities and of irresistible political power in his own country".<sup>26</sup>

The end of July brought the arrival of Hopkins in Rio de Janeiro. Wise, believing the United States could, by peaceful means, now exert itself in South America, wrote Buchanan informing him of Hopkins' arrival. Wise reported that the United States could "secure a vast extension of their commerce without departing in the least from their established and wise policy of non-intervention and avoiding all entangling alliances, and

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24

Ibid., p. 278.

25

Ibid., p. 280.

26

Ibid.



without committing themselves to any guarantees which may hereafter involve or embarrass our foreign relations." <sup>27</sup>

While Hopkins was in Rio de Janeiro, Wise was summoned to an interview with the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs who wished to know of pending United States plans in the La Plata. <sup>28</sup> Wise replied that he was not at the present time informed of his country's intentions; however, he relayed his own personal conviction that the United States would like to see Brazil lead the mediation in the La Plata. Although the Brazilian Minister did not respond favorably, Wise's hopes were buoyed later that day by a conversation with General Thomas Guido, Argentine Minister to Brazil, who suggested that his country would be willing to make sacrifices rather than submit to European domination in the La Plata. <sup>29</sup> Wise informed Hopkins of these conversations and the additional information which he possessed. Wise directed Hopkins to offer to Carlos Lopez, President of Paraguay, the "good offices" of the

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Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, July 31, 1845, Manning, p. 284.

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Ibid., p. 289.

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Ibid., p. 293.

United States' Minister to Brazil.<sup>30</sup> Wise, hoping for approval of his actions and requesting future direction, wrote Buchanan:

I have been autocrat in all these matters, because I was left to the guidance of my own judgement alone, and because I did not choose to sit still and see the honor and interests of my country suffer. Now I am actually sought after, and anxiously called on by both Brazil and B. Ayres for advice, counsel and information on subjects of the highest importance affecting the deepest interests of North and South America, in connection with each other and with European Powers, and I find myself without Counsel from my own government-- Please to guide me, Sir, in the best and most politic course to serve our Country. That is my sole object. The states in South America are worthy of our regard, you may depend upon it, and I verily believe that now is the time to win them by no other means than those of honesty, conciliation and dignified fair-play.<sup>31</sup>

In August, 1845, Wise learned that England and France had become directly involved in the conflict by capturing an Argentine squadron and holding the crew.<sup>32</sup> Having been deceived by Ouseley especially angered Wise. "If God spares me over to see Ouseley, I will, on personal account, convince him that my opinion of his

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>32</sup>Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, August 24, 1845, Manning, p. 296.

conduct to me was worth respecting."<sup>33</sup> Wise dispatched Hopkins with instructions urging Paraguay's neutrality.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of August, 1845, Wise was heartened by a conversation with the Minister of Buenos Aires, General Guido. The Minister informed Wise that his government had instructed him to lay before the United States Minister to Brazil "the entire correspondence of the Argentine Republic respecting the affairs of the River Platte <sup>35</sup> /Plata/" Wise, upon discerning the amiability of Guido, decided to press the Argentine Minister concerning "what the Argentine Republic would say to a recognition of Paraguay by the United States?"<sup>36</sup> Guido replied that Rosas had already conceded the loss of Paraguay and that no effort would be made to re-  
<sup>37</sup>acquire the area. Pleased by the attitude of Guido, Wise proceeded to act as a go-between for Argentina and Brazil. His ostensible purpose was "to prevent jealousy, and war perhaps, between Brazil and the Argentine

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33

Ibid., p. 297.

34 Ibid., p. 298.

35 Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, August 27, 1845, Manning, p. 298.

36 Ibid., p. 300.

37

Ibid., p. 301.

Republic;" however, Wise desired to assume a more  
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 active role in the affairs of the La Plata. Wise  
 continued to be encouraged by Guido, who wrote the  
 American Minister concerning "The noble interest which  
 Your Excellency takes in the independence and welfare  
 of the States of America, and particularly of my  
 39  
 country."

The seemingly encouraging state of affairs was not  
 long in duration as disheartening news reached Wise.  
 The official Journal of Rio de Janeiro reported that  
 Paraguay had entered into "treaty with the province of  
 Corrientes and had agreed to furnish an army of 10,000  
 40  
 men to oppose Rosas." Believing that England and  
 France had invited Paraguay to take this action, Wise  
 perceived as their ultimate intention the control of  
 the trade of "the outlets and inlets of the Interior of  
 41  
 all South America." As the hostilities increased,

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Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, September 6,  
 1845, Manning, p. 306.

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Thomas Guido to Henry A. Wise, September 14, 1845,  
 Manning, p. 307.

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Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, November 24, 1845,  
 Manning, p. 310.

41

Ibid., p. 311.

Wise reported to Secretary of State Buchanan, that, "England and France to prevent Rosas from cutting the throats of tens have humanely intervened to slay hundreds, if not thousands, of the devoted Argentines."<sup>42</sup> Although Wise did not believe that the European powers could ever conquer the land of Argentina, he reiterated to Buchanan that England and France would open the rivers and "monopolize their trade to compensate them for the cost of conquest."<sup>43</sup> The fact that Brazil was being pressured by England and France to join the alliance against Argentina worried Wise.<sup>44</sup> He once again implored his country to assume a more active role in the affairs of the area.

I have essayed all means to impress upon him, (Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abreu) as I would most earnestly on my own government, the important reflections that the last grand development of unexplored country upon earth is the Interior of South America. The command of its trade, the richest of the world now in prospect is a magnificent prize of acquisition; and the Parana and Paraguay Rivers are the life-flowing

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Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, December 16, 1845, Manning, p. 311.

43 Ibid., p. 312.

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Ibid.

veins and arteries of its outlet and inlet... I call again, therefore, the most earnest attention of the President to the affairs of the River Plate /Plata/. The United States, I know, desire only peace and an equality of commercial privileges; but the armed intervention has brought nothing but war and devastation instead of peace, and is our commerce not in danger of losing its equal privileges by the British and French arrangement of the affairs of South Eastern South America? If not before, next to the Oregon question, the issues of the River Plate /Plata/ are the most important to the United States. Trying to convince you of the importance of the subject I leave its treatment in your hands.<sup>45</sup>

Into this tedious diplomatic situation walked Polk's special agent, Edward Hopkins. The special agent was "young, vigorous, ambitious, and he had unlimited energy required for an inspection of the isolated land."<sup>46</sup> Hopkins' egotistical temperament had resulted in his being tried three times for misconduct and insubordination by the United States Navy before<sup>47</sup> finally being dismissed. Wise was favorably impressed by Hopkins and had found him to be a "thoroughly

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Ibid., pp. 312-313.

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Harold F. Peterson, Argentina and the United States, 1810-1960 (New York: State University of New York, 1964), p. 134.

47

Ibid., p. 135.

receptive pupil".<sup>48</sup> In appropriating Hopkins' mission to further his own ideas, Wise failed to perceive the potential danger of Hopkins' own soon-to-be-realized conception of his self-importance.

Upon arriving within Paraguay, Hopkins immediately became extravagant in his praise of the wealth and industry of the country. Hopkins attempted to dissuade President Lopez from cooperating with England or France. Without authorization, he fully committed his government to the recognition of Paraguay. Hopkins then proceeded, again without authorization, to offer to mediate between Argentina and Paraguay. Lopez, seemingly delighted by Hopkins personally, accepted Hopkins' offer of mediation; however, the conflict between Paraguay and Argentina worsened and Hopkins decided to return to Rio de Janeiro.

While in Paraguay, Hopkins kept Wise informed of his activities. Wise, in turn, reported on Hopkins' progress to Buchanan. On January 11, 1846, Wise reported to Buchanan that Hopkins had "tendered the good

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48

Ibid.

49

Cady, Foreign Intervention, pp. 175, 177.

offices of the U.S. in mediation with the Argentine government" and "he has done so entirely on his own motion and without seeming to understand precisely the object or purpose of the suggestion (Hopkins was instructed to offer the kind offices of Wise) which I ventured to make more than twelve months ago."<sup>50</sup> For the second time, Wise requested of his government that he be allowed to personally intervene in the La Plata area.

I do not seek any such general powers nor for any object whatever, though if the Pres. should see fit to entrust me with any powers in relation to the settlements which ought to be made of the affairs of S. E. S. America, I will cheerfully exert the best faculties with which I am endowed to execute them to his satisfaction and to the honor and interest of our Country.<sup>51</sup>

Once again Wise's requests fell upon deaf ears in Washington. Perhaps deciding to protect his own role in the Hopkins affair, Wise wrote the young man expressing the hope that he had not gone further than his<sup>52</sup> directions allowed. Prior to sending the letter,

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<sup>50</sup>Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, January 11, 1846, Manning, p. 315.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, February 18, 1846, Manning, p. 318.



Wise was surprised by Hopkins' arrival in Rio de Janeiro. Wise presented the young man with the letter of chastisement, and Hopkins informed Wise of the worsening state of affairs in the La Plata. Wise, without waiting for instructions from Washington, decided to send Hopkins to Buenos Aires and directed that the young man should attempt to gain access to Rosas through William Brent, United States charge d'affairs. <sup>53</sup> Wise's dispatch of February 18, 1846, attempted to justify his actions to Buchanan.

In recommending Mr. Hopkins to pursue the course he had, and in the steps which I myself have taken in the important matter of his agency, I have followed the suggestions of my calmest judgment and of my best reflections... And if we have all gone too far in assuming the responsibilities of Mr. Hopkins' going to B. Ayres as a bearer to Mr. Brent of the mediation of the U. States, between Gen. Rosas and Paraguay; it must be remembered that he was duly authorized to tender that mediation... I have tried my best, in a word, to do for the best: no evil at all events can result from what has been done, much good may, and will, I believe come out of it; and I confidently trust that my action

and that of Mr. Hopkins will be approved. If it proves successful, I am sure it will be commended.<sup>54</sup>

After Hopkins reached Buenos Aires he was "thoroughly convinced, by this time, that he was about the most important personage in South America."<sup>55</sup> However, Hopkins' egotism suffered at the hands of Rosas as the Argentine dictator refused to communicate with the special agent except through Brent.<sup>56</sup> Hopkins became disgusted with what he viewed as a too subservient attitude of Brent. Hopkins wrote Wise that "my mission has been unsuccessful, and the dignity of the United States has been insulted most grossly in the person of Mr. Brent by Gen. Rosas."<sup>57</sup> Hopkins also regarded his treatment as demeaning and declared that "he would rather have had his horse die under him than to have been obliged to endure such humiliation."<sup>58</sup> It was plain to Hopkins that he was much more capable of handling the mediation than was Brent and wrote that "Brent was a mere child" in Rosas' hands and that "he

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<sup>54</sup> Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, February 18, Manning, p. 320.

<sup>55</sup> Cady, Foreign Intervention, p. 177.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Edward A. Hopkins to Henry A. Wise, March 27, 1846, Manning, p. 332.

<sup>58</sup> Cady, Foreign Intervention, p. 177.

is utterly unfitted to assert or support the dignity of his position or his country."<sup>59</sup> Hopkins' dignity would not allow him to stay in Buenos Aires; however, he fired a parting shot at Rosas in the form of a letter delivered after Hopkins was safely aboard ship. According to historian John Cady, "for sheer audacity and impudence, this letter of Hopkins probably has no equal in the annals of American diplomacy."<sup>60</sup> Rosas, Hopkins wrote, was a despot, "the Judiciary, the 'rotten tool of oppression', and the legislature, the 'cringing puppet' of the Dictator"<sup>61</sup>. Contributing to the complete destruction of the prestige of the United States, Brent, attempting to appease Rosas, disclosed his entire correspondence with Wise.<sup>62</sup>

When Wise learned of Hopkins' actions he proceeded to write a letter of severe chastisement. However, once again, Hopkins arrived before Wise finished and the angry Minister presented to Hopkins the letter.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>

Edward Hopkins to Henry Wise, March 27, 1846, Manning, p. 332.

<sup>60</sup>Cady, Foreign Intervention, p. 178.

<sup>61</sup>Edward Hopkins to Juan Manuel de Rosas, March 19, 1846, cited in Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>63</sup>Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, April 29, 1846, Manning, p. 337

Although Hopkins' mistakes were recognized and criticized by Wise, the Minister did not feel he shared any blame for his role in the affair. Wise forwarded his correspondence with Hopkins to Buchanan in a dispatch which ended:

It is not for me to characterize these proceedings of Mr. Hopkins. The only comment which it is my province to make is: that the whole scope of all the advice, counsel, or views which, under instructions, I gave to Mr. Hopkins, is to be seen in my letters to him, particularly those of the 11th of February last and of the 12th inst., which have heretofore been and are now transmitted to the Department; that there was nothing in my course, conversation to incite or prompt such proceedings, whether right or wrong; on the part of Mr Hopkins; and nothing on my part I trust, which can in the slightest degree deserve the disapprobation of the President of the U. States. <sup>64</sup>

After Hopkins returned to the United States, Wise had a chance to reflect on the entire state of affairs in the La Plata. He remained confident of the correctness of his actions and reminded his government that "If we have all gone too far in assuming the responsibility of Mr. Hopkins going to B. Aires as a bearer to Mr. Brent of the mediation of the U.S. between Gen.

Rosas and Paraguay, it must be remembered that he was  
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 duly authorized to tender that mediation." Wise,  
 however, did sincerely regret that Brent had disclosed  
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 their correspondence. By June, 1846, conditions in  
 the La Plata had improved to such an extent that Wise  
 could optimistically report to Buchanan.

There is no danger now that Paraguay will fall into the hands of the intervention... G. Britain and France will retire in shame, baffled, duped, and disgraced both in policy and arms. No power, at the River, will unite with them again soon. They are looked upon no longer as either formidable foes or serviceable friends. I think that no harm has resulted to us in any way. Mr. Brent's course will be very far justified by the termination of affairs as now certainly expected; and it will have made us a fast friend forever in Gen. Rosas, whilst at the same time we will surely not have lost the good-will of Pres. Lopez. The "utmost prudence and circumspection" in respect to the armed intervention in the Plata has been exercised, I am sure, by our naval squadron on this station, and by this Legation as far as it has had anything whatever to do with it.<sup>67</sup>

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Henry A. Wise to James Buchanan, June 19, 1846, Manning, p. 342.

66

Ibid., p. 334.

67

Ibid., p. 349.

The state of affairs in the La Plata was indeed complicated and confusing. Political unrest existed in the area prior to Wise's arrival in Brazil and continued after his departure. Eventually, England and France tired of their unsuccessful efforts in this area and ceased to press the Argentine government. It is interesting to note that in contrast to vigorous opposition to British or European interference in Texas, Oregon, California, or Central America, "Polk's Administration did not see fit to attempt to prevent European intervention in the affairs of these South American nations." <sup>68</sup> Obviously, as history indicates, President Polk's main interests lay in extending the boundaries of the United States. The La Plata, thus, was not as important to the President as it was to his Minister to Brazil. The president was not in sympathy with Wise's actions and criticized his conduct of overstepping his authority. Polk wrote that "it was indeed provoking that any foreign representatives should have acted with <sup>69</sup> so little discretion and judgement as Mr. Wise."

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Sioussat, "James Buchanan," Bemis, p. 315.

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Quoted in Cady, Foreign Intervention, p. 181.

Obviously, without presidential support, Wise's ideas for American involvement and enrichment were not to be realized. Wise had hoped that, with a minimum effort, the United States could gain lucrative trading privileges and greatly increase its influence in the La Plata area. The United States, however, decided that it was best to remain aloof from the crisis in the La Plata and pursue a policy of non-involvement.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SLAVE TRADE

Of the issues with which Wise dealt during his stay in Brazil, his interest and involvement in opposing the African slave trade was the most exemplary. Wise's grandson and biographer, Barton Haxall Wise, wrote that it was in opposing the slave trade that Wise "devoted his best energies."<sup>1</sup> The slave trade was an extremely profitable business in Brazil. Not only was the trade profitable for the plantation owners to whom the slaves were destined, but it was also profitable to the important merchant class of Brazil. Wise opposed all forms of the hideous trade but was, of course, most interested in opposing American involvement in the trade.

The United States forbade further importation of slaves in 1808, the same year in which Great Britain had abolished slavery. In 1833, "the British government prohibited slavery in the Empire and then refused to allow slaves in its territorial waters or on the high

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Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 109.



seas--even if they were on other nations' ships."<sup>2</sup>

Since the United States opposed any search of their ships by the British, other nations carried on the slave trade under the protection of the American Flag.<sup>3</sup>

In 1841 an American brig, the Creole, was forced into the Bahamas by its mutinous cargo of slaves. When the British freed the rebellious slaves, tensions were aroused between the two countries.<sup>4</sup> In 1842, Secretary of State Daniel Webster and a special British emissary, Lord Ashburton, met in Washington to discuss, among other things, Anglo-American differences arising from the slave trade. The resulting Webster-Ashburton Treaty, in addition to resolving the border dispute between Canada and the United States, called for "joint cruising" of American and British warships off the coast of Africa.<sup>5</sup> Under the terms of "joint cruising" the American warships would be responsible for slave traders flying the American flag and the British warships were

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<sup>2</sup>Howard Jones, To the Webster-Ashburton Treaty: A Study in Anglo-American Relations, 1783-1843 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>4</sup>Wilbur D. Jones, The American Problem in British Diplomacy, 1841-61 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Daniel P. Mannix, Black Cargoes, A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), p. 219.

responsible for the rest. By 1843, the American squadron, charged with patrolling three thousand miles of African coast, consisted of two ships, and for the next fourteen years, the squadron never consisted of more than seven warships.<sup>6</sup>

The Americans on patrol off the African coast did not take their duty very seriously; squadron leader Matthew C. Perry did not see his role as suppressing the slave trade; rather his duty was to "assert the rights and prevent the abuse of the flag."<sup>7</sup> A flourishing trade progressed; however, Perry stated in a report to the Secretary of Navy in 1843 that "I cannot hear of any American vessels being engaged in the transportation of slaves; nor do I believe there has been one so engaged for several years."<sup>8</sup> Perry's apathetic view of the slave trade notwithstanding, a British consul to Brazil reported that sixty-four thousand slaves entered Brazil in 1844.<sup>9</sup> Other slaves were transported to Cuba and other Latin America ports; however, nowhere was the trade as large as Brazil.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence F. Hill, Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and Brazil (Durham: Duke University Press, 1932), p. 113.

Even zealous squadron commanders could not possibly police the slave traders. Geographic conditions made the African coast difficult to police and the Brazilian coast offered many sheltered places favorable to the illicit trader. Brazilian officials often aided the slave trader and "slave vessels were frequently equipped with the open and avowed assistance of the public authorities."<sup>10</sup> A prime example of the complicity of Brazilian officials is the case of Menoel da Fonseca, who, "though the most notorious slave dealer in all Brazil, went about the capital city in pursuit of his occupation entirely unmolested," and, "in fact, was an intimate friend of senators, deputies, and ministers."<sup>11</sup> Wise estimated the profits of a slave trader to range from six hundred to twelve hundred percent.<sup>12</sup>

The aspect of the slave trade which most angered Wise was the role of Americans. This outrage over American involvement was shared by Wise's close friend, John Tyler. Many Americans served in the traffic in one way or another and hundreds of thousands of Negroes

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Ibid., p. 120.

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Ibid., p. 121.

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Ibid.

were transported to Brazil with American aid.<sup>13</sup> The President, addressing Congress, described the extent of American involvement.

It is true that this traffic is carried on altogether in foreign ports and that our own coasts are free from its pollution; but the crime remains the same wherever perpetrated, and there are many circumstances to warrant the belief that some of our citizens are deeply involved in its guilt... American vessels, with the knowledge, as there are good reasons to believe, of the owners and masters, are chartered, or rather purchased, by notorious slave dealers in Brazil, aided by English brokers and capitalists, with this intent. The vessel is only nominally chartered at so much per month, while in truth it is actually sold, to be delivered on the coast of Africa; the charter party binding the owners in the meantime to take on board as passengers a new crew in Brazil, who, when delivered on the coast, are to navigate her back to the ports of Brazil with her cargo of slaves. Under this agreement the vessel clears from the United States for some port in Great Britain, where a cargo of merchandise known as "coast goods", are designed especially for the African trade, is purchased, shipped, and consigned, together with the vessel either directly to the slave dealer himself or to his agents or accomplices in Brazil. On her arrival a new crew is put on board as passengers and the vessel and cargo consigned to and equally guilty factor or agent on the coast of Africa, where the unlawful purpose originally designed

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<sup>13</sup>Henry Wise to James Buchanan, cited in Jose Honorio Rodrigues, Brazil and Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 175.

is finally consummated. The merchandise is exchanged for slaves, the vessel is delivered up, her name obliterated, her papers destroyed, her American crew discharged, to be provided for by the characters, and the new or passenger crew put in command to carry back its miserable freight to the first contrivers of the voyage, or their employees in Brazil.<sup>14</sup>

The initial instructions which Wise received did not mention the slave trade. They did, however, direct that "Wise was to stress the interest of both Brazil and the United States in the proper relations of the white and black races."<sup>15</sup> This proper relation was, of course, the institution of slavery as it then existed in the South. Wise was an adamant believer in this system, yet, one of the major reasons for his becoming Minister to Brazil was a desire to end the slave trade.<sup>16</sup> While in Congress it was slave-owner Wise who stated in 1835:

Sir, Slavery is interwoven with our political existence, is guaranteed by our Constitution, and its consequences must be borne with our

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J. D. Richardson, ed. Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897, p. 2216.

15

Sioussat, "John Caldwell Calhoun," Bemis, p. 206.

16

John Wise, The End of an Era, p. 4.

Northern brethren, as resulting from our system of government; and they cannot attack the institution of slavery without attacking the institutions of the country, our safety and welfare... Sir, a slave is as much property here, Washington, D.C., as in Virginia; property by the law and the Constitution.<sup>17</sup>

It may seem unusual that Wise, slave-owner and spokesman for slavery while in Congress, would be unremitting in his efforts to end the slave trade; however, the Minister was a strong believer in law and had a deep sense of moral right. Wise not only believed in the legality of slavery, but he also believed slave owners had a certain moral obligation; "I as firmly believe that slavery on this continent is the gift of Heaven to Africa."<sup>18</sup> This is also the man who, on his death bed, told his son, John, "There is but one true test of anything, and that is, is it right."<sup>19</sup> For Wise, slavery was right, but the slave trade was wrong; therefore, he was obligated to do his utmost to right the legal and moral wrong of the slave trade.

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Henry Wise, Speech in the House of Representatives, February 16, 1835, cited in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 47.

18

Henry Wise, Speech before Virginia Colonization Society, January 10, 1838, cited by Barton Wise, *Ibid.*, p. 158.

19

*Ibid.*, p. 422.

The slave trade in Brazil, as in many parts of the world, was firmly entrenched prior to Wise's arrival. George Proffit, Wise's predecessor, wrote concerning the extent of American involvement: "It is a fact not to be disguised or denied, that the slave trade is almost entirely carried on under our flag and in American built vessels." <sup>20</sup> Shortly after arriving in Brazil, Wise wrote his friend and fellow southern politician, John Gordon, expressing much the same sentiment:

They carry the arms and ardent spirits which are the hellish agents and instruments of the savage wars of African captivity. But it is too true and notorious that the United States vessels and flag are used and abused, prostituted, I ought to say, to this odious traffic; and it is my duty and purpose to exert every means in my power to wipe out the foul stain from our country's flag of being its chief protection.<sup>21</sup>

It became obvious to Wise that the "joint cruising" policy with Great Britain would not effectively reduce the slave trade. The area to be covered was too immense

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George Proffit to Abel Parker Upshur, quoted in Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 121.

21

Henry Wise to John Gordon, October 25, 1844, Henry Wise Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

considering the number of ships which were available to police that area. Wise also questioned the commitment of the British in policing the slave trade.

American merchants in Rio de Janeiro reported to Wise that the "whole struggle on the part of England has been to monopolize the trade of Africa."<sup>22</sup> Wise

included this observation on the slave trade in a message written to the British Minister at Rio de Janeiro, Hamilton Hamilton.<sup>23</sup> Wise was able to report

that the British Minister "seemed gratified at the tone of my letter to him and is evidently himself sincere in earnest efforts to strike at the slave trade though it be at the risk of English commerce."<sup>24</sup> Wise's

letter to Hamilton precipitated a reply from the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen, who responded by asserting British interests in ending the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

According to St. George Leakin Sioussat, Wise "had succeeded in accomplishing what Calhoun had failed

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22

Henry Wise to John C. Calhoun, January 12, 1845, Diplomatic Dispatches, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25

Sioussat, "James Buchanan," Bemis, p. 317.



to do--he had precipitated a debate with the British Government over the slavery question, or at least over the slave trade."<sup>26</sup>

In January 1845, Wise received a tip that the American brig, Porpoise, which was then in the harbor of Rio de Janeiro, was carrying slaves.<sup>27</sup> Knowing that justice was not likely to be served in Brazilian courts, Wise requested that Brazilian Foreign Minister Franca arrest and hold four Americans of the Porpoise in order to send them home for trial.<sup>28</sup> Without waiting a reply, Wise personally investigated. Satisfied that there was a violation of law, Wise arrested and placed a guard on the suspects.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, some Brazilians were also detained and, "as a result, a wave of excitement seized the city populace that led to a demand for the release of the Brazilians."<sup>30</sup> Wise was eventually forced to yield and release all parties involved, yet,

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26

Ibid., p. 319.

27

Henry Wise to Ernesto Franca, January 24, 1845, Diplomatic Dispatches, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.

28

Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 139.

29

Ibid.

30

Ibid.

Secretary of State Buchanan commended his zeal while censuring the impetuous minister for exceeding his authority.<sup>31</sup> Wise's reply to Buchanan reflected his intense attitude. He did not believe that the Secretary of State grasped the true extent of the outrages of the African slave trade. Wise believed that all Americans would join with him in castigating the use of the American flag in furthering the slave trade. This was especially true, Wise wrote, since "our flag alone gives the requisite protection against the right of visit, search, and seizure; and our citizens, in all the characters of owners, of consignees, of agents and of masters and crews of our vessels, are concerned in the business and partake of the profits of the African slave trade."<sup>32</sup> Wise concluded with a stinging criticism of the participants in the trade:

They carry the arms and the ardent spirits which are the hellish agents and instruments of the savage wars of African captivity; they afford safe passage to Brazilian masters and crews intended for the slave vessels when sold, and for the American masters and crews who have manned these

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31

Sioussat, "James Buchanan," Bemis, p. 310.

32

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, February 18, 1845, Diplomatic Dispatches, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.

vessels over to the Coast; and they realize a profit in proportion to the risks of a contraband trade. In one word, the sacred principle of the inviolability of the protection of our flag, is perverted in the ports of Brazil into a perfect monopoly of the unhallowed gains of the navigation of the African slave trade.<sup>33</sup>

Recognizing that "joint cruising was doomed to failure, Wise urged that he and other government representatives be given authority to investigate, arrest, and send home culprits."<sup>34</sup> No such authority was granted, yet, Wise continued to spice his correspondence with anti-slave-trade passages. He realized that it would be difficult to involve the Brazilian government in opposing the lucrative trade. The slave trade, Wise admitted, was the "staple business" of Brazil, thus, it was unlikely the Brazilian government would oppose its own economic interest.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it was his own government which Wise believed would have to intervene. Take away American involvement and the protection of the American flag, Wise believed, and

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33

Ibid.

34

Sioussat, "James Buchanan," Bemis, p. 317.

35

Henry Wise to Messrs. Maxwell, Wright and Co., December 9, 1844, quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 110.

the slave trade would diminish.<sup>36</sup> "In fact," Wise wrote, "without the aid of our citizens and our flag,<sup>37</sup> it could not be carried on with success at all." A typical Wise sentiment was included in a May, 1845, dispatch to Buchanan: "But, Sir, permit me familiarly to beseech you not to allow the mass of matter, or my prolixity, to deter you from giving the subject of the slave trade your serious attention."<sup>38</sup>

The zeal with which Wise opposed the slave trade presented a paradox to many who remembered the zeal with which Wise argued the cause of slavery in Congress. Wise reported that he was often questioned concerning this and, in a letter to some American merchants at Rio de Janeiro, responded:

The only answer I shall deign to give is, that the fact of my being a slave holder is itself a pledge and guarantee that I am no fanatic, foolishly and wickedly bent upon running amuck against any lawful property or trade; and that I find the same old interest at work here

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36

Henry Wise to John C. Calhoun, February 18, 1845, Diplomatic Dispatches, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, DC.

37

Ibid.

38

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, May 1, 1845, Manning, p. 276.

and now, to fasten African slavery upon Brazil, which in our early history fastened the condition of a slave state on Virginia... I love the flag, under which my country has won its national independence and its national respectability, and with which it protects our persons and property, too well to sit still, or to sit silent, and see its 'blessed bunting' openly or secretly chartered or sold for the uses of an infamous trade, as fine linen is bought and sold for the uses of prostitution.<sup>39</sup>

The strong stand that Wise took in opposing the slave trade made him persona non grata in Brazil. On December 9, 1846, Wise reported to Buchanan, "My strenuous opposition to the prostitution of the flag of the U. States to the nefarious uses of the slave trade has rendered me naturally unpopular in this country."<sup>40</sup> Wise's unpopularity increased as a result of his handling of an incident involving an American sailor, Lieutenant Alonzo B. Davis. This incident and Wise's reaction, which ultimately contributed to his departure from Brazil, will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

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Henry Wise to Messrs. Maxwell, Wright and Co., December 9, 1844, quoted in Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 113-114.

40

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, December 9, 1846, Manning, pp. 369-370.

Although Emperor Don Pedro II did not favor the  
 slave trade, he was powerless to stop it. <sup>41</sup> Brazil,  
 Wise reported, was a "slave trading Gov. against its  
 own laws and treaties." <sup>42</sup> To be a Brazilian "man of  
 consequence" you must engage in the slave trade, and  
 the slave traders are "either the men in power, or are  
 those who lend to the men in power and hold them by the  
 purse strings." <sup>43</sup> Wise realized that his strenuous  
 protests had rendered him to be "very obnoxious"; how-  
 ever, he believed that an American Minister must either  
 "wink at the slave trade or be obnoxious to Brazil." <sup>44</sup>

It was the belief of Wise that he had the backing  
 and support of the United States in his opposition to  
 the slave trade. <sup>45</sup> He did not, however, have the strong  
 support of the American government. Although Wise and  
 other diplomats constantly informed and attempted to

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41

Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America, p. 837.

42

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, December 9, 1846,  
 Manning, p. 370.

43

Ibid.

44

Ibid.

45

Henry Wise to Messrs. Maxwell, Wright and Co.,  
 December 9, 1844, cited in Barton Wise, Life of Henry  
 A. Wise, p. 114.

badger their governments into action, the United States government was reluctant to act. Historian Lawrence F. Hill wrote that American officials in Washington had little enthusiasm in regard to the slave trade and that the "secretaries of state all but ignored the desperate appeals of our ministers and consuls for counsel and advice on matters pertaining to their offices."<sup>46</sup>

According to Hill, "There was little or no variation in policy whether the Department of State was directed by Daniel Webster, James Buchanan, John C. Calhoun or John M. Clayton."<sup>47</sup>

After learning that he was to return to the United States, Wise, commenting to Buchanan on his three years of service, wrote, "I have faithfully and fearlessly endeavored to snatch our flag from their uses in the slave trade."<sup>48</sup> In the same dispatch, Wise expressed the hope to Buchanan that his replacement, David Tod, would "firmly discharge his duty as to the slave trade."<sup>49</sup>

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Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 136.

47

Ibid., p. 137.

48

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, April 12, 1847, Manning, p. 380.

49

Ibid., p. 381.

Although Wise was not directly successful in his efforts to end the slave trade, his efforts were industrious and admirable. At the end of the 1840's the British took final steps to close the Brazilian slave trade. The government sent a squadron to Brazil with orders to break up the trade. The leader of the squadron, Admiral Reynolds, burned three slave ships in Rio de Janeiro. Reynolds proceeded up the Brazilian coast, burning any slave vessels he encountered. This direct style of intervention in Brazil, similar to Wise's attempted actions regarding the Porpoise, proved to be decisive. By 1851, it was reported in Parliament that the Brazilian slave trade was ended.

In 1855, Wise wrote James B. Hambleton, who was preparing a biography of the soon-to-be governor of Virginia: "I found the Africa slave trade actively carried on in Yankee vessels from North of Mason and Dixon's line," and "winked at by the authorities; and I had...to snatch our country's flag...from its protec-

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Daniel Mannix, Black Caroges, p. 239.

51

Ibid.

52

Ibid.



tion."<sup>53</sup> Wise was evidently satisfied and proud of his role in opposing the Africa slave trade.

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Henry Wise to James P. Hambleton, 1855, Henry Wise Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

## CHAPTER V

### A TEMPESTUOUS END

"He was largely a creature of impulse, and a man whose acts found their springs in the promptings of his nature, rather than in premeditated design." <sup>1</sup> Barton Haxall Wise recorded this description of his grandfather's character in The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia. Wise's impulsive nature had perhaps lessened his effectiveness in dealing with the African slave trade. This point may be exemplified by Wise's failure to follow proper procedures in dealing with the slave-traders aboard the Porpoise. His hasty and unauthorized actions resulted in the ultimate release of obviously <sup>2</sup> guilty traders. Furthermore, Brazilian officials resented Wise's "discourteous language" in communicating <sup>3</sup> with the Brazilian government. Wise's rashness and impetuosity in dealing with the slave trade rendered

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1

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 405.

2

Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 139.

3

Ibid., p. 95.

him unpopular to the Brazilian government; however, the forceful manner in which the irascible minister handled a tedious diplomatic incident resulted in the termination of Wise's position as Minister to Brazil.

Wise informed his government of the following incident by enclosing, in a November 2, 1846, dispatch, a copy of his letter to Barao de Cayru.<sup>4</sup> Lieutenant Alonzo B. Davis, an officer on the U.S.S. Saratoga, came ashore to procure supplies. While at the store of J. H. Brewer and Company, Davis was informed of a disturbance, involving two American sailors, which was taking place next door. Davis intervened, breaking up the disturbance; and took custody of one of the combatants. As Davis was proceeding to return with his prisoner to the ship, a squad of Brazilian soldiers appeared and seized Davis' prisoner, an American sailor named Driscoll. Thinking the soldiers had come to aid him, the American lieutenant assured the Brazilians that he needed no assistance and requested that they let him accompany his prisoner back to the ship. The soldiers refused and seized Driscoll, who resisted and was severely beaten. Davis, who had unbuckled his sword as he entered

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Wise to Barao de Cayru, November 2, 1846, Manning, pp. 357-359.

Brewer and Company, returned to the store and armed himself. Following the soldiers, he anticipated securing Driscoll's release upon proper explanation; however, Driscoll was taken to the palace and, as Davis prepared to follow, the guards drew bayonets. Drawing his sword in self-defense, the guards retreated and Davis sheathed his sword. Davis approached the steps where he was met by an officer of the guard and invited to enter. Upon entering, Davis was attacked, made a prisoner, and several American sailors who had followed Davis were treated likewise.<sup>5</sup>

Wise reported that this assessment of the events was shared not only by Davis but also by "Chaplain Lambert and Lt. Stark of the Columbia frigate, and of Capt. I. Shubrick to Com. Rousseau; and further, by the deposition of Sam Macoduck, Wm. M'Lennon, Benj. Wattlington and John Holliday, taken under oath before Gorham Parks Esq., U.S. Consul at this court."<sup>6</sup> Davis, Wise reported was "an officer exemplary for his good conduct" and it was Wise's belief that:

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5

Ibid.

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Ibid., p. 358.

The Imp. Gov. will utterly disclaim and disavow this outrage in all its parts; that it will order the immediate release of Lt. Davis and the American sailors seized and imprisoned with him; and that it will cause the soldiers of the guard who took the sailors from Lt. Davis' command, and especially the officer at the time in command of the National Guard, to be condignly punished for the illegality, wanton cruelty,<sup>7</sup> cowardice and treachery of their conduct.

Wise soon learned that his optimistic outlook for a quick settlement in favor of the United States was not to be. Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs Cayru reported to Wise that the American version of the incident did "not conform in any particular to the official reports of the civil and military authorities or of the various guards who aided in quelling the scandalous tumult formented by that officer."<sup>8</sup> The Brazilian version contrasted greatly with the American version of Davis and the other sailors. The differences were illustrated in a letter from the Brazilian Foreign Minister to the Brazilian Minister to the United States.<sup>9</sup> According to this letter, Driscoll was not in Davis' custody when the soldiers arrived. Moreover, Driscoll

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Saturnio de Souza to Felipe Jose P. Leal, May 31, 1847, Manning, pp. 390-396.

and two other sailors attacked the soldiers, who only acted in their self-defense in imprisoning the seamen. After following the soldiers to the palace, Davis attempted forcibly to free the prisoners and was arrested for his actions.

Despite the obvious wrong-doings on the part of the Americans involved, Cayru reported that the Emperor had reviewed the events and, owing to the "special consideration" given the United States, Davis would be allowed to return to the custody of Commodore Rousseau to receive such punishment as the investigation warranted.<sup>10</sup> The other American sailors were not regarded "to be of an importance equal to that of Lieutenant Davis," thus, they were to be kept in prison for further examination.<sup>11</sup> Wise, refusing to accept the release of Davis in this manner, replied to Cayru that the Brazilian decision was unacceptable and reasserted his demand for the release of Davis and the American sailors.<sup>12</sup>

Cayru, obviously irritated by Wise's refusal to

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10

Barao Cayru to Henry Wise, November 2, 1846, Manning, p. 359.

11 Ibid.

12

Henry Wise to Barao Cayru, November 2, 1846, Manning, p. 360.

accept Davis' release under the Brazilian terms, replied that if Wise would not find the Brazilian offer acceptable, there would be "no doubt that it will be better appreciated by the Government of the Union."<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Cayru retorted, in order for Lieutenant Davis and the sailors to be released, it would be necessary to show that the officer did not commit a "scandalous outrage."<sup>14</sup> In addition, Cayru stated that the Brazilian government would only consider "official reports" and not those persons "who took part in the riot or received information from them."<sup>15</sup>

By November 4, Lieutenant Davis was once again a free man and was safely aboard the U.S.S. Saratoga.<sup>16</sup> Wise was not in the least satisfied as Davis' release was not "unconditionally and without the least implication of dishonor"; moreover, the other sailors remained in custody.<sup>17</sup> An irritated Wise once again questioned Cayru concerning when the other sailors would be

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<sup>13</sup> Barao de Cayru to Henry Wise, November 3, 1846, Manning, p. 361.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Wise to Barao de Cayru, November 4, 1846, Manning, p. 362.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

released.<sup>18</sup> The Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs retorted that he had "nothing to add" concerning "this unpleasant subject".<sup>19</sup>

Wise was a proud man for whom honor held a very special meaning. To uphold his personal honor, Wise fought a duel with his first political rival, Richard Coke, and issued challenges to two others.<sup>20</sup> In the Davis affair, Wise believed that not only had his personal honor been injured, but the honor of the United States suffered as well. It particularly angered Wise that Cayru attempted to separate him from his government.<sup>21</sup> Wise admitted to Buchanan that he had been "explicit and decided in tone", but the irritated Minister reported that he had "nothing to retract or to modify."<sup>22</sup>

On November 15, 1846, the gulf between the Brazilian government and Henry A. Wise broadened appreciably.

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Ibid.

19

Barao de Cayru to Henry Wise, November 4, 1846, Manning, p. 363.

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Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 41.

21

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, November 16, 1846, Manning, p. 365.

22

Ibid.



On that day, a celebration was planned to honor the baptism of the imperial princess. Commodore Rousseau, the commander of the United States squadron whose sailors were still imprisoned, refused to discharge his cannons in honor of the princess. Wise supported the action of Rousseau and compounded the situation by re-  
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 fusing to attend the celebration at court. According to Lawrence Hill, "Exaggerated, perverted, and misinterpreted by the public press, the commander's action generated a strong feeling against both the officer himself and the American minister."  
 24  
 Needless to say, the Brazilian government was incensed. They blamed Wise not only for avoiding the celebration at court, but the Brazilian government also believed that Wise had advised  
 25  
 Rousseau not to fire the salute. Accordingly, on November 16, Barao de Cayru, Minister of Foreign Affairs in Brazil, wrote Gaspar Jose de Lisboa, Brazilian Minister to the United States, with instruction to contact the American Secretary of State and request the  
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 recall of Henry A. Wise. This was necessary, Cayru

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 365-366.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> Barao de Cayru to Gaspar Jose de Lisboa, November 16, 1846, Manning, p. 376.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

wrote, because of Wise's "morose and gloomy temper", his inability "to discuss diplomatic questions with calmness", and "offensive and revolting" actions.

Regardless of any action of the United States government, Cayru reported "That so long as Mr. Wise remains accredited to this Government, he shall never again be invited to the festivities at the Palace." Wise was unaware of the request for his recall when he learned that, despite the fact that Lieutenant Davis had departed for the United States, a trial took place in his absence and he was found guilty. For his actions on October 31, 1846, Davis was sentenced to three years and four months imprisonment with labor. At the same time Wise also learned that the Emperor "had not heard one word about the affair of Lt. Davis until yesterday." Accordingly, this revelation raised the ire of the already incensed minister. Wise urged Buchanan that these "uncivilized" people "ought to be taught a lesson";

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27

Ibid.

28

Ibid.

29

Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 103.

30

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, November 16, 1846, Manning, p. 366.

Wise recounted several instances in which American citizens had been wronged by the Brazilian police and government. This list included Wise's own son, who had been "beaten in the streets".<sup>32</sup> The conditions regarding Brazilian treatment of Americans had reached such a state that Wise reported to Buchanan that had the Brazilians not released Lieutenant Davis, he was prepared to "have thrown on Com. Rousseau the responsibility of making reprisals."<sup>33</sup> Concerning any action which the United States would take against Brazil, Wise expected no Brazilian reprisals. Wise reasoned that Brazil feared the United States and would "not lightly trifle with a Power which can injure them as deeply as the U. States can, if compelled to resent their insults and outrages."<sup>34</sup> In all that he had done and said concerning the Lieutenant Davis and the subsequent events, Wise had no regrets. In fact, he asked Buchanan for "appreciation" from the President concerning his conduct and begged "the President not to allow any representatives of this Gov. in this case to

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32

Ibid.

33

Ibid., p. 367.

34

Ibid., pp. 367-368.

separate me, as Minister, from my own Gov. at home."<sup>35</sup>

Hardly had the furor over the snubbing of the baptism of the princess subsided when new cause for tensions arose. On December 2, the birthday of the Emperor was celebrated in Rio de Janeiro and Commodore Rousseau once again refused to fire a salute. Wise, in accordance with the decision of the Brazilian government was not among the invited guests to the celebration at Court.<sup>36</sup> It was in keeping with Wise's personality that he did not acquiesce to the pressures of ostracism. His defiant attitude remained unchanged and he did not repent any of his actions. It is interesting to note that he did not lose his sense of humor. In reporting to Buchanan concerning his failure to receive an invitation to the Emperor's birthday celebration, Wise wrote that "they did not send me a Circular to attend Court on the second inst., but my own birthday was on the third inst., and I did not condescent to honor either His Majesty or Her Majesty . . . to the august celebration of my Republican birth."<sup>37</sup>

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35

Ibid.

36

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, December 9, 1846, Manning, p. 368.

37

Ibid., p. 369.

Even the most seemingly peaceful event could not take place without adding to the ever increasing gulf between Wise and the Brazilian government. Near the end of November, 1846, Alta California Harris was born while her parents were in the process of emigrating from the United States to Brazil. The child was to be baptised on board a United States frigate and Wise was invited to speak. The American Minister gave an inspiring talk during which he compared the birth of the Harris child to the birth of the Imperial princess. The contents of the speech remained unknown until the Journal de Commercio obtained and published, on March 28, 1847, a copy of Wise's talk. Wise's disrespectful actions were compounded by the Brazilian belief that the American minister had purposely furnished a copy of the speech in order that it appear in Rio de Janeiro. According to Lawrence Hill, the reaction in Brazil "of the public mind was similar to that of a bull facing a waving red rag"; moreover, this feeling was not allayed

38

Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 100.

39

Ibid.

40

Saturnio de Souza to Felipe Jose P. Leal, May 31, 1847, Manning, p. 396.

by the fact that Wise's remarks had been addressed to an exclusively American audience on board an American public vessel which lay entirely outside the territorial jurisdiction of the empire.

By early December, Wise learned that the Brazilian government had requested his recall. He reported to Buchanan that at Court they "boast most loudly" of his recall and reprimand. Despite his unpopular status, Wise maintained the correctness of his actions and pointed to the support which the "brethren of the Diplomatic Corps" had manifested in his behalf. It is interesting to note that, in requesting Wise's recall, Cayru reported that the American Minister was universally censured by this same group of constituents. By now, Wise knew that he would be replaced; in fact, he had requested the termination of his office prior to the controversy of October 31. However, Wise still

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41

Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 100.

42

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, December 9, 1846, Manning, p. 369.

43

Ibid., p. 371.

44

Barao de Cayru to Gasper Jose de Lisboa, December 5, 1846, Manning, p. 377.

45

James Buchanan to Henry Wise, March 29, 1847, Manning, p. 134.

requested the support of the President and he did not wish to be recalled in dishonor. He reported to Buchanan, "I am not willing to be recalled for doing what sound policy as well as a sense of duty obviously requires."<sup>46</sup>

While harsh words were being exchanged in Rio de Janeiro, Secretary of State Buchanan and Brazilian Minister Lisboa were encountering more amicable discussions in Washington. Although Lisboa had been directed to demand Wise's recall, a settlement was reached after ten days of discussions between Buchanan and Lisboa and there was to be no condemnation of Wise.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Lisboa assured Buchanan that no "offense was or could have been intended by this act to the dignity of the flag or a nation with whom it is the earnest desire of Brazil to cultivate the most friendly relations."<sup>48</sup> Obviously, Wise was elated at this turn of events, and he was further gratified by the fact that Buchanan reported that President Polk "has been gratified to see

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Henry Wise to James Buchanan, December 9, 1846, Manning, p. 371.

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Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 98.

48

James Buchanan to Gaspar Jose de Lisboa, February 2, 1847, Manning, p. 131.

that your course in respect to Lieutenant Davis and the imprisoned seamen has been marked by that energy and zeal which the diplomatic agents of the United States abroad are always expected to exhibit when their fellow citizens have been wronged or the flag of their country has been insulted."<sup>49</sup>

In late February, prior to Wise's learning of the agreement between Buchanan and Lisboa, the American Minister attempted to reopen relations with the Brazilian government. The seamen had been released from prison; only one of the sailors was brought to trial and he was acquitted.<sup>50</sup> On January 21, 1847, Wise received a dispatch from his government instructing him to request an audience with the Emperor in order that he could present a letter from the President congratulating the Emperor on the birth of a princess.<sup>51</sup> Seeing this as opportunity to bury past differences, Wise resolved to "await calmly the first favorable and tangible

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James Buchanan to Henry Wise, February 2, 1847, Manning, p. 132.

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Henry Wise to James Buchanan, February 27, 1847, Henry A. Wise Papers, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

51

Ibid.



occasion to come to explanations with them."<sup>52</sup> Further, buoying Wise's hopeful expectations, the Admiral of the Brazilian squadron fired a salute honoring George Washington on his birthday and the next day the American squadron fired a salute celebrating the anniversary of an Imperial prince. This caused the Journal de Commercio, the paper which had led the way in denouncing Wise, to remark that "it appears to us that we may conclude that the existing differences will terminate in a manner satisfactory and honorable to both countries."<sup>53</sup> However, Wise's request for an audience was denied. Believing that "I had gone the full length of the proper line of conciliation," Wise resolved not to further press the Brazilian government.<sup>54</sup>

Wise's spirits soared when he finally learned of the conciliation between Buchanan and Lisboa: "Nothing could be more satisfactory to me than the mode in which you have adjusted the serious controversy with the Brazilian Gov. growing out of the imprisonment of Lieut.

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52

Ibid.

53

Ibid.

54

Ibid.

Davis and the three sailors of the U.S.S. Saratoga, at  
 55  
 Rio de Janeiro on the 31st." It seemed to Wise that  
 all the scorn and abuse which he had received had been  
 rewarded. His relation was such that Wise assured  
 Buchanan that he would do nothing that would risk the  
 56  
 restoration of harmony and friendship. Knowing that  
 his course of action had been justified and that he was  
 being "recalled at his own request", Wise now believed  
 57  
 that he could depart in honor. He was, however,  
 instructed to continue his duties until his replacement,  
 58  
 David Tod of Ohio, arrived in Rio de Janeiro.

Wise's optimistic view of the understanding be-  
 tween Buchanan and Lisboa was not shared by the Brazil-  
 ian government. Much to Wise's dismay, the Emperor  
 disclaimed Lisboa's actions and appeared before the  
 59  
 Assembly and announced Lisboa's recall. The following

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55

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, April 12, 1847,  
 Manning, p. 378.

56

Ibid., p. 380.

57

James Buchanan to Henry Wise, March 29, 1847,  
 Manning, p. 136.

58

Ibid.

59

Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations, p. 99.

day Wise was informed of the Emperor's disapproval of the Buchanan-Lisboa settlement and that diplomatic interruption between the Brazilian government and Wise would continue. <sup>60</sup> Upon learning of this further insult, Wise considered demanding his passport and leaving Brazil immediately; however, considering his course of action had been justified, he chose to await the arrival of David Tod. <sup>61</sup> On June 17, Wise consented, through the aid of an intermediary, to make one last attempt at reconciliation. However, the Brazilian government desired that the American minister sign a document which would admit wrong-doing over the part of Lieutenant Davis and himself. <sup>62</sup> Needless to say, Wise was indignant over this final rebuke. He relayed his finality, stating, "I would have my right hand cut off and stuck on a post to point the way to a gibbet, before I would permit my thumb and forefinger to touch pen to sign the paper of such degrading notes!" <sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Barao de Cayru to Henry Wise, May 4, 1847, Manning, p. 384.

<sup>61</sup> Henry Wise to James Buchanan, May 7, 1847, Manning, pp. 384-385.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Wise to James Buchanan, June 27, 1847, Manning, pp. 386-387.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 387.

With little diplomatic business to be carried on, there was little for Wise to do but await the arrival of Tod. The minister believed that in order for the United States to save honor, an apology must be demanded. If Brazil would not acquiesce, then Wise advised his government to use military force.

The capture of Vera Cruz will enable you to send ships to the South Atlantic, where I assure you they are needed. Never distrust the people of the U. States in such cases. They may be weary of whipping Mexicans, but they will justify the demand at the same time of what is right from any other people. We must be firm and decisive, I repeat, with this Brazilian people. They need a lesson.<sup>64</sup>

David Tod arrived in Rio de Janeiro in early August. On August 10, 1847, Wise, citing repeated insults, demanded "passports for himself, family, and effects."<sup>65</sup> In informing the new minister of the current state of affairs in Rio de Janeiro, Wise urged Tod not to request an audience until instructions could be received from Washington.<sup>66</sup> Tod could not "reconcile the line of

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64

Ibid., p. 388.

65

Henry Wise to Saturnio de Souza, August 12, 1847, Manning, p. 397.

66

Henry Wise to David Tod, August 12, 1847, Manning, p. 400.

conduct" which Wise recommended and sought an audience.<sup>67</sup>  
 Tod was granted an interview, and affairs eventually  
 reached such a state that the new minister was able to  
 inform Buchanan that at a recent ball, the Emperor "had  
 the pleasure of dancing with Mrs. Tod, and I also had  
 the pleasure of dancing with the Empress."<sup>68</sup>

On September 1, 1847, the Columbia conveyed a stub-  
 born and prideful Virginian out of the harbor of Rio  
 de Janeiro. Wise arrived in the United States in  
 October and journeyed to Washington to report to  
 Buchanan. Wise considered taking the matter of his  
 treatment at the hands of the Brazilian government be-  
 fore Congress; however, he decided against this.<sup>69</sup>  
 Returning to private life, Wise traveled to his resi-  
 dence in Onancock. His return was celebrated by cannon  
 fire and an appropriate speech.<sup>70</sup> Brazil and the United  
 States resumed cordial relations and Wise's role was

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67

David Tod to Henry Wise, August 12, 1847,  
 Manning, p. 399.

68

David Tod to James Buchanan, September 18, 1847,  
 Manning, p. 403.

69

James Buchanan to David Tod, November 22, 1847,  
 Manning, p. 160.

70

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 119.

upheld by his government. It was particularly gratifying to Wise that President Polk gave his stamp of approval. During the time that Wise served in the House of Representatives and James Polk was Speaker of that body, Wise had been severely critical of Polk.<sup>71</sup> He was now, however, filled with gratitude for his former political foe.<sup>72</sup>

The departure of a controversial minister, a change of presidential administrations, and a willingness on both sides for the renewal of friendly relations resulted in a resumption of cordial relations. The United States government did not admit to any wrongdoing on the part of any of its officials, however, Brazil's authority to try and punish offenders within their territory was acknowledged.<sup>73</sup> The Davis affair was finally buried by an April 11, 1849, dispatch of Zachary Taylor's Secretary of State, John M. Clayton.

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71

Eugene Irving McCormac, James K. Polk (New York: Russel and Russel Inc., 1965), p. 97.

72

Ibid., p. 708.

73

John Clayton to Sergio T de Macedo, April 11, 1849, Manning, p. 161.

Years have rolled away since this controversy commenced. Mr. Wise has returned to his own country and to private life. The two governments have continued their kind relations with each other. Friendly Ministers have been interchanged, and while declining now to open again as useless discussion, I take pleasure in stating to you, that the President regrets the occurrences which unfortunately led to a temporary misunderstanding between the two governments, and the more especially as he anxiously desires to cultivate with Brazil pacific and intimate relations, and cherishes towards the Constitutional Sovereign and the people of that great country, the most respectful and friendly regard.<sup>74</sup>

## CHAPTER VI

### AN UNLIKELY DIPLOMAT

Henry A. Wise was an extremely complex man. It is indeed difficult to comprehend such a paradoxical figure. He was a slaveowner and spokesman for that cause in Congress but later professed slavery to be wrong.<sup>1</sup> A superb politician, Wise, in essence, committed political suicide in eastern Virginia by championing the cause of western Virginia in the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1850-1851. Although a fiery advocate of the rights of the South, Wise opposed secession and encouraged Virginia to remain within the Union.

An evaluation of the diplomatic career of Wise is also difficult. A generally accepted definition of a diplomat would be "one who employs tact or skill in dealing with others." In The Art of Diplomacy, Thomas A. Bailey enlarges upon this definition by outlining some characteristics which good diplomats should possess: intelligence, commanding appearance, exemplary

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Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 396.



character, tact, charm, ability to get along, discretion,  
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 adaptability and patience. This is certainly not a  
 complete listing of desirable characteristics, however,  
 it does provide a starting point for judging Wise.

Intelligence is difficult to judge in any man.  
 There is no consensus today concerning the proper means  
 for judging intelligence; it is doubly difficult to  
 consider the comparative intelligence of a man who has  
 been dead for over one hundred years. Yet, judging  
 either by the standards of his time or contemporary  
 time, Wise was certainly above average. Although his  
 early education was sketchy at best, Wise graduated with  
 first honors from Washington College.  
 3  
 His great skill  
 at extemporaneous speaking was aided by a broad knowl-  
 edge of history. Although not a scholar of the mold of  
 one of his adversaries, John Quincy Adams, Wise certain-  
 ly possessed a mind capable of handling a diplomatic  
 mission.

Unfortunately, nature did not in any fashion pro-  
 vide Wise with a "commanding appearance". He was tall,

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Thomas A. Bailey, The Art of Diplomacy (New York:  
 Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), pp. 36-42.

3

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 22.

extremely thin, pale, and his nose and hair combined to give him an Indian-like appearance. Add to this the fact that Wise lacked neatness in dress and was habitually chewing tobacco, and it is clear that his physical appearance was less than awe-inspiring.

Considering "exemplary character" as a desirable diplomatic characteristic is much like attempting to rate an individual's intelligence; any evaluation is both arbitrary and difficult. However, by any standards, Wise's character was above reproach. Honor, as has been previously illustrated, was supremely important to Wise. Honesty and a sense of moral right accompanied honor. It was these characteristics which led Wise to insure the well being of someone as personally odious to him as John Brown. It was also this sense of moral right which led Governor Wise to call for universal public education which would mingle the children of the rich and poor in schools. Another ingredient of an "exemplary character" which Wise certainly exhibited was courage. Throughout his life he was entirely fearless. During the Civil War, Wise was constantly without fear

of enemy fire.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, Wise's character could be regarded as "exemplary".

In considering tact, there is absolutely no doubt where Wise stood. His lack of tact contributed more than any other factor to the ultimate failure of his diplomatic mission. As has been previously shown, Wise's correspondence with Brazilian authorities exhibited a painful lack of tact. George Sioussat regretted Wise's "lack of tact" because it hurt his "important criticisms" of the slave trade.<sup>6</sup>

Charm is a characteristic that is not easily judged. Certainly Wise could be charming to friends, associates, and political audiences. Any man of such oratorical and storytelling ability certainly could be entertaining, witty, and personable. However, Wise did not attempt to use charm on what he perceived to be unfriendly Brazilian authorities. Unfortunately for Wise, charm was not a way to sway unfriendly opinion. He believed a forceful and strong front was the way to conquer opposition.

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Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, pp. 339-340.

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George Sioussat, "James Buchanan," Bemis, p. 316.

To a certain extent, all people in public life have an ability to get along with others. That ability is measured in the comparative popularity of individuals. Conversely, no public figure is without enemies, and Wise certainly had his share. Wise was an outspoken individual who refused to mince words. Men of that type rarely get along well with a large majority of people. Like many individuals, Wise got along well with those who embraced his views and shared his beliefs. He did not, however, have the type of personality that enabled him to maintain cordial relations with political enemies or others who did not share his point of view. Examples of Wise's inability to get along with those in opposition to his views occurred frequently throughout his life. A prime example occurred shortly after the beginning of the Civil War. Wise disagreed with the strategy employed by General John B. Floyd, his immediate superior, in defending the mountains of western Virginia. Robert E. Lee was sent to mediate between the two former governors of Virginia. Even Lee's talents proved futile and, partly owing to the lack of cohesion between Floyd and Wise, the western counties went over

to the enemy.<sup>7</sup> Wise's ability to get along with others was certainly not up to the standards required of a good diplomat.

Unfortunately for Wise, his lack of tact was accompanied by a lack of discretion. Wise was certainly not a man to be either moderate in speech or behavior. While in Congress, he had once threatened to murder John Quincy Adams in his seat.<sup>8</sup> Various examples of Wise's lack of discretion during the course of his diplomatic mission have already been noted. A prime example of Wise's lack of discretion may be shown by his June 27, 1847, dispatch to Buchanan. In this dispatch Wise urged his government to use military force to persuade Brazil, because he regarded it as a country that was in "need of a lesson".<sup>9</sup> Wise was a man who acted on impulse with little regard for the consequences.

Adaptability refers to an individual's ability to be flexible enough to adapt to changing situations. This characteristic is required of any politician and

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7

Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 307.

8

Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 92.

9

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, June 27, 1847, Manning, p. 388.

Wise was undeniably a skilled politician. He could seemingly adjust to all types of people and situations. An interesting illustration of Wise's adaptability can be found in Barton Wise's, The Life of Henry A. Wise. He recounts an episode in which Wise traveled to Tangier, a remote island located in the Chesapeake Bay and situated approximately fifteen miles from Wise's home on Onancock Creek. During his visit, Wise dined with the family of Thomas Crockett. Mrs. Crockett, in obvious awe of her distinguished visitor, was extremely nervous and ill at ease. By the conclusion of his visit, Wise had put his hostess at ease and restored her confidence.<sup>10</sup> Wise could fit in with the company of John Tyler, John C. Calhoun, or James Buchanan, but he was still able to be "at home" in a rustic house on a remote island in Virginia.

Ambitious men are very seldom endowed with a great deal of patience and Wise was indeed ambitious. According to Thomas A. Bailey, patience is "the very soul of diplomacy."<sup>11</sup> Henry A. Wise was, unfortunately, a

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Barton Wise, Life of Henry A. Wise, p. 125.

11

Thomas Bailey, The Art of Diplomacy, p. 42.

diplomat without a "soul". Wise's impatience was a hindrance throughout his diplomatic mission; however, his lack of patience was particularly obvious in his handling of the Davis affair. Wise refused to allow the Brazilian authorities any time to investigate the incident. He called for the "immediate release" of

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Davis and the seamen. When the release of the suspects was not immediate, Wise wrote an insulting and demanding letter to the Brazilian authorities.

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Eventually, as a result of the Davis affair, the gulf between the Brazilian government and Wise widened to such an extent that a communication between the two parties became practically nonexistent. According to Thomas A. Bailey, a primary task of the diplomat is to keep the discussions alive, even when they seem hopeless.<sup>14</sup> Partly as a result of his lack of patience, Wise failed to "keep the discussions alive". Unfortunately, patience was not a weapon which Wise stocked in his diplomatic arsenal.

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 12

Henry Wise to Barao de Cayru, November 2, 1846, Manning, p. 360.

13

Henry Wise to Barao de Cayru, November 4, 1846, Ibid., p. 362.

14

Thomas Bailey, The Art of Diplomacy, p. 43.

Using Bailey's diplomatic qualities as a guide, Wise does not meet the standards of a good diplomat. He meets the requirements of intelligence, exemplary character, ability to get along, and adaptability; however, Wise lacked a commanding appearance, tact, charm, discretion, and patience. In any judgement of Wise, it must be remembered that he was not trained or schooled in diplomacy; rather, his appointment was the product of the spoils system. Poor health led to Wise's abandoning Congress for the diplomatic service, and his close friendship with John Tyler assured him a job. Thomas A. Bailey believes that the "spoils system and diplomacy do not mix," and in the case of Henry A. Wise,<sup>15</sup> his assertion is correct.

Professor Elmer Plischke, of the University of Maryland, believes that "although diplomats play a vital role in the conduct of United States foreign relations, they, and the nature of their missions are frequently misunderstood or misjudged."<sup>16</sup> Although this may be

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15

Ibid., p. 47.

16

Elmer Plischke, United States Diplomats and Their Missions (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1975), p. 131.



true in many cases, in the case of Henry A. Wise the reverse is true. He misunderstood the nature of his mission. Wise was energetic and eager, but he misunderstood the entire nature of diplomacy. An aggressive politician, Wise was unable to alter his personality. An energetic, eager, and aggressive politician became an energetic, eager, and aggressive diplomat. The qualities which made Wise a successful politician contributed to his lack of success as a diplomat.

The early life of Wise was not conducive to diplomatic training. He developed a quick temper and became very combative in nature. Orphaned at the age of six, raised in a fishing and agricultural community, it can be well imagined that young Wise participated in more than his fair share of scuffles. In later life, Wise's combative nature "sought an outlet in profanity, fist fights, and verbal assaults." According to Elmer Plischke, on only eight occasions through 1975 have foreign governments "requested the recall" of American diplomats. Although it has been previously shown

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17

Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 93.

18

Elmer Plischke, United States Diplomats and Their Missions, p. 131.

that Brazil requested Wise's recall, Plischke does not  
19  
include Wise among the eight diplomats.

Despite Plischke's oversight, it is significant to note how seldom American diplomats have become so unpopular that their recall was requested. It took Wise less than three years to become so odious to the Brazilian government that they felt forced to "request his recall".

In evaluating Wise, it is interesting to draw a comparison between the irascible Virginian and his political opponent from Massachusetts, John Quincy Adams. The diplomatic career of John Quincy Adams concluded prior to Wise's appointment to Brazil, thus the two were not diplomatic contemporaries. They were political contemporaries and bitter rivals; therefore, an interesting comparison can be drawn. At the age of ten, young Adams accompanied his distinguished father  
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on a diplomatic mission to France. He enrolled at an academy at Plassy, however, John Adams soon returned to America and his son accompanied him. Their stay in America was short as the Continental Congress ordered

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 9.

John Adams to return to Europe. They returned to France and John Quincy Adams attended the Latin School at Amsterdam. In 1787 Adams matriculated to Leyden University, but interrupted his studies to serve as Secretary to Francis Dana, United States Minister to Russia.<sup>21</sup> In 1783 John Adams interrupted his son's Russian stay by recalling him to Paris to serve as his personal secretary. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson had been instructed by Congress to negotiate treaties of friendship and commerce for their new nation. The son was now old enough to mingle with his father's colleagues and associates and this greatly expanded the scope of the young man's learning.<sup>22</sup>

Samuel Flagg Bemis reports that John Quincy Adams "attended the round of diplomatic dinner and soirees to which his father was invited."<sup>23</sup> Young Adams witnessed at first hand the work of the diplomatic corps. There could be no better training than that which John Quincy Adams received in Paris.

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21

Worthington Chauncy Ford, "John Quincy Adams," Dictionary of American Biography, ed., by Allen Johnson, Vol. I, p. 84.

22

Samuel Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy, p. 14.

23

Ibid.

Returning to America, Adams graduated from Harvard in 1787. He studied law and was admitted to practice in 1790. In 1794 President Washington commissioned Adams Minister to the Netherlands. Adams' subsequently served his country as Minister to Germany, Russia, and England. His diplomatic career culminated in 1817 with his appointment to Secretary of State under James Monroe. Certainly "no more congenial office could have fallen to him, and his previous training and experience eminent-  
24  
ly fitted him to fill it." John Quincy Adams was as qualified and competent as any diplomat who has served the United States. His education, training, background, and personality combined to form an ideal diplomat.

Henry Alexander Wise's life contrasted greatly with his Yankee adversary. His early education was sketchy and, owing to the death of his father in 1812, Wise was unable to benefit from his father's experience. Due to the geographic isolation of his native county, Wise grew up quite apart from the mainstream of American affairs. John Quincy Adams virtually cut his teeth on American diplomacy, while Henry Wise had absolutely no

contact with diplomacy until his election to Congress. During his Congressional career, the major diplomatic question which Wise addressed was the annexation of Texas. Representing the Southern viewpoint, Wise strongly approved of annexation and believed this would be the best means of countering British policy in North America. Wise worried that the ultimate aim of British policy was control of the trade of the Gulf of Mexico and ultimately the Pacific Ocean. <sup>25</sup> Wise believed that if Mexico persisted in any attempt to reconquer Texas, volunteers from the South would conquer Mexico and extend the boundaries of slavery to the Pacific Ocean. <sup>26</sup> This obviously reflects a narrow, biased, and extremist Southern viewpoint. Wise's sectional view was not the type which a successful diplomat would espouse. Successful diplomats are usually men of moderation. Unfortunately Henry A. Wise was by no means a moderate man. His life was not governed by moderation but rather by zealousness.

In regarding Wise, however, a case may be made that he was simply a victim of circumstances. It may be

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<sup>25</sup>

Samuel Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union, p. 451.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 452.

recalled that one of the reasons that Wise sought foreign service was his poor health. While in Brazil, Wise's poor health continued and at times, he was not able to carry out the duties of his office. In June, 1846, Wise reported to Buchanan that he was "just recovering from a month's severe illness." Three months later, Wise wrote Buchanan that he was confined by a "severe" illness. In addition, the poor health of one of his children caused Wise concern at the time of his illness. He recorded in his memorandum book that between September 11-14, 1846, he "watched over sick child day and night". It may also be recalled that Wise reported to Buchanan in November, 1846, that his own son was "beaten in the streets". Wise's personal health and the well-being of his family certainly weighed upon his mind.

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27

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, September 26, 1845, Manning, p. 309.

28

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, June 19, 1846, Ibid., p. 341.

29

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, September 12, 1846, Ibid., p. 355.

30

Henry A. Wise Papers, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

31

Henry Wise to James Buchanan, November 11, 1846, Manning, p. 366.

As has been previously shown, Wise's unpopularity and early departure basically resulted from the Davis affair and his unpopular opposition to slave trade. Certainly Wise's opposition to the slave trade was laudatory. Given the nature of the importance and extent of the slave trade in Brazil, anyone who opposed the trade was going to be unpopular. Wise put it aptly when he wrote Buchanan that you must "either wink at the slave trade by U.S. vessels or be obnoxious to Brazil."<sup>32</sup>

In the Davis affair, Wise viewed his responsibility to be that of supporting the accused Americans. He supported them to such an extent and so vocally that he became obnoxious to the Brazilian government. By demanding the "immediate release" of Davis and the United States seamen, Wise carried out his perceived responsibility.<sup>33</sup> His guilt lay not in shirking his responsibility, but rather in carrying his responsibility too far and being intemperate and impatient in outlook and conduct.

Authors who have written concerning Wise's diplomatic stay in Brazil have noted Wise's shortcomings.

<sup>32</sup> Henry Wise to James Buchanan, December 9, 1846, Ibid., p. 370.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Wise to Barao de Cayru, November 2, 1846, Ibid., p. 360.

George Sioussat described Wise as "impetuous", regretting his "rashness" in dealing with the Brazilian government concerning the Davis affair. <sup>34</sup> Lawrence Hill notes Wise's "caustic and undiplomatic remarks", which <sup>35</sup> contributed to his unpopularity in Brazil. No one is better qualified to judge Henry Alexander Wise than his grandson and biographer, Barton Haxall Wise. Wise's grandson did not gloss over his distinguished ancestor's faults or mistakes. He recognized that Henry Wise was a "creature of impulse" who "undoubtedly lacked symmetry of character, and was in many respects erratic, and wanting in the even balance which we associate with a really great man." <sup>36</sup> Although diligent, honest, and patriotic, Henry Alexander Wise was simply not an effective diplomat. Unlike John Quincy Adams, he was not able to balance a political and diplomatic career. In the instance of Henry Alexander Wise, a superb politician did not serve as a superb diplomat.

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34

George Sioussat, "James Buchanan", Bemis, P. 319.

35

Lawrence Hill, Diplomatic Relations between the United States and Brazil, p. 97.

36

Barton Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise, pp. 404-405.



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## VITA

The author was born, raised, and currently lives on Virginia's Eastern Shore. He attended Onancock High School where he lettered in football, basketball, baseball, and track. In 1969, Custis attended North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. While a student at Wesleyan, Custis served as dorm president, was a member of the baseball and bowling teams, was a member of Nu Gamma Phi fraternity, and was inducted in Omicron Delta Kappa honor society. Since his graduation from North Carolina Wesleyan in 1973, Custis has been a teacher, coach, and administrator in Accomack County. He is currently a social studies teacher and coach at Onancock High School in Onancock, Virginia. He married the former Dianne Williams of Courtland, Virginia. They have one child, Jennings Story Custis, and currently reside in Onancock.