

THE BROOKS-SUMNER CANING INCIDENT - 1856

PART I: SUMNER'S "INSULT"



*A section of a speech on the Senate floor called
"A Crime against Kansas" by Senator Charles
Sumner of Massachusetts.*

May 20, 1856

The Senator from South Carolina has read many books of chivalry, and believes himself a chivalrous knight, with sentiments of honor and courage. Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight - I mean the harlot, Slavery. For her, his tongue is always profuse in words. Let her be impeached in character, or any proposition made to shut her out from the extension of her wantonness, and no extravagance of manner or hardihood of assertion is then too great for this Slavery.....If the slave States cannot enjoy what, in mockery of the great fathers of the Republic, he misnames equality under the Constitution - in other words, the full power in the National Territories to compel fellow-men to unpaid toil, to

separate husband and wife, and to sell little children at the auction block - then, sir, the chivalric Senator will conduct the State of South Carolina out of the Union! Heroic knight! Exalted Senator! A second Moses come for a second exodus!

[Ed. note: The above portion of a very long speech was considered by some to be such slander against Senator Butler of South Carolina (who was not present) that it led to physical violence. Representative Preston Brooks, a relative of Senator Butler, took revenge on Sumner by beating him into unconsciousness with a cane on the floor of the Senate. Sumner suffered permanent brain damage, and it was years before he could retake his seat in Congress.]

PART II: BURLINGAME'S OUTRAGE



From a speech by Representative Anson Burlingame - made on the floor of the House of Representatives in response to the beating of Charles Sumner.

*June 21,
1856*

On the 22nd day of May, when the Senate and the House had clothed themselves in mourning for a brother fallen in the battle of life in the distant State of Missouri, the Senator from Massachusetts [Charles Sumner] sat in the silence of the Senate chamber, engaged in the employments pertaining to his office, when a member from the House, who had taken an oath to sustain the Constitution, stole into the Senate, that place which had hitherto been held sacred against violence, and smote him as Cain smote his brother.

MR. KEITT (in his seat): - That is false.

MR. BURLINGAME: - I will not bandy epithets with the gentleman. I am responsible for my own language. Doubtless he is responsible for his.

MR. KEITT: - I am.

MR. BURLINGAME: - I shall stand by mine. One blow was enough; but it did not satiate the wrath of that spirit which had pursued him through two days. Again and again, quicker and faster fell the leaden blows, until he was torn away from his victim, when the Senator from Massachusetts fell in the arms of his friends, and his blood ran down on the Senate floor. Sir, the act was brief, and my comments on it shall be brief also. I denounce it in the name of the Constitution it violated. I denounce it in the name of the sovereignty of Massachusetts, which was struck down by the blow. I denounce it in the name of humanity. I denounce it in the name of civilization which it outraged. I denounce it in the name of that fair-play which bullies and prize-fighters respect. What! strike a man when he is pinioned - when he cannot respond to a blow? Call you that chivalry? In what code of honor did you get your authority for that?

PART III: PRESTON BROOKS' EXPLANATION

From a speech made by Representative Preston Brooks explaining his assault on Senator Charles Sumner.

*July 14,
1856*



If I desired to kill the Senator, why did not I do it? You all admit that I had him in my power. Let me tell the member from New Jersey that it was expressly to avoid taking life that I used an ordinary cane, presented to me by a friend in Baltimore, nearly three months before its application to the "bare head" of the Massachusetts Senator. I went to work very deliberately, as I am charged - and this is admitted, - and speculated somewhat as to whether I should employ a horsewhip or a cowhide [a type of whip] but knowing that the Senator was my superior in strength, it occurred to me that he might wrest it from my hand, and then - for I never attempt any thing I do not perform - I might have been compelled to do that which I would have regretted the balance of my natural life.

The question has been asked in certain newspapers, why I did not invite the

Senator to personal combat in the mode usually adopted....

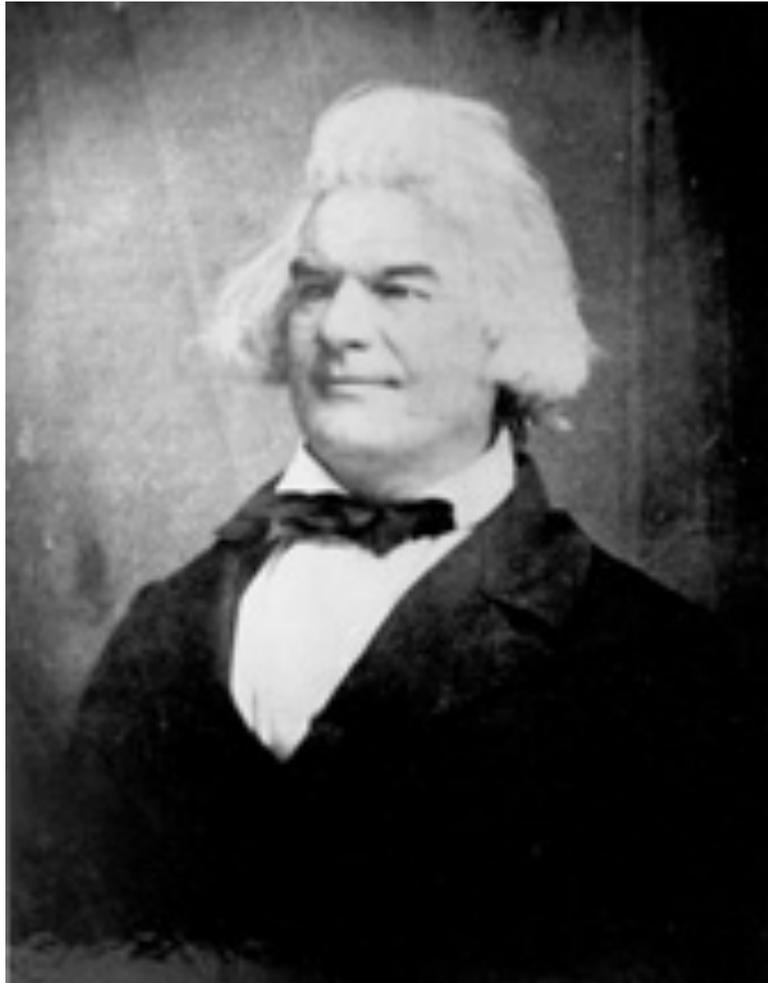
My answer is, that the Senator would not accept a message and having formed the unalterable determination to punish him, I believed that the offence of "sending a hostile message," superadded to the indictment for assault and battery, would subject me to legal penalties more severe than would be imposed for a simple assault and battery. That is my answer....

And now, Mr. Speaker, I announce to you and to this House, that I am no longer a member of the Thirty-Fourth Congress.

(Mr. Brooks then walked out of the House of Representatives.)

[Ed. note: Preston Brooks was expelled from the House, but considered a hero by many in the South. He received a number of canes from admirers to replace the one he broke over the head of Senator Sumner.]

PART IV: SENATOR BUTLER'S REACTION



[Editor's note: This is the beginning of a very long speech by Andrew Pickens Butler. It was printed in the Congressional Journal in 1856. I found the text in an antique store in Denver.]

MR. BROOKS AND MR. SUMNER

**SPEECH OF HON. A.P.
BUTLER**

OF SOUTH CAROLINA,

In the Senate, *June 12, 1856*

Mr. BUTLER. Mr. President, the occasion and the subject upon which I am about to address the Senate of the United States, at this time, have been brought about by events over which I have had no control, and could have had none – events which

have grown out of the commencement of a controversy for which the Senator from Massachusetts (not now in his seat) (Mr. SUMNER) should be held exclusively responsible to his country and his God. He has delivered a speech the most extraordinary that has ever had utterance in any deliberative body recognizing the sanctions of law and decency. When it was delivered I was not here: and if I had been present, what I should have done it would be perfectly idle for me now to say....My impression now is that, if I had been present, I should have asked the Senator, before he finished some of the paragraphs personally applicable to myself, to pause; and if he had gone on, I would have demanded of him, the next morning, that he should review that speech, and retract or modify it, so as to bring it within the sphere of parliamentary propriety. If he had refused this, what I would have done I cannot say; yet I can say that I would not have submitted to it. But what mode of redress I should have resorted to, I cannot tell.