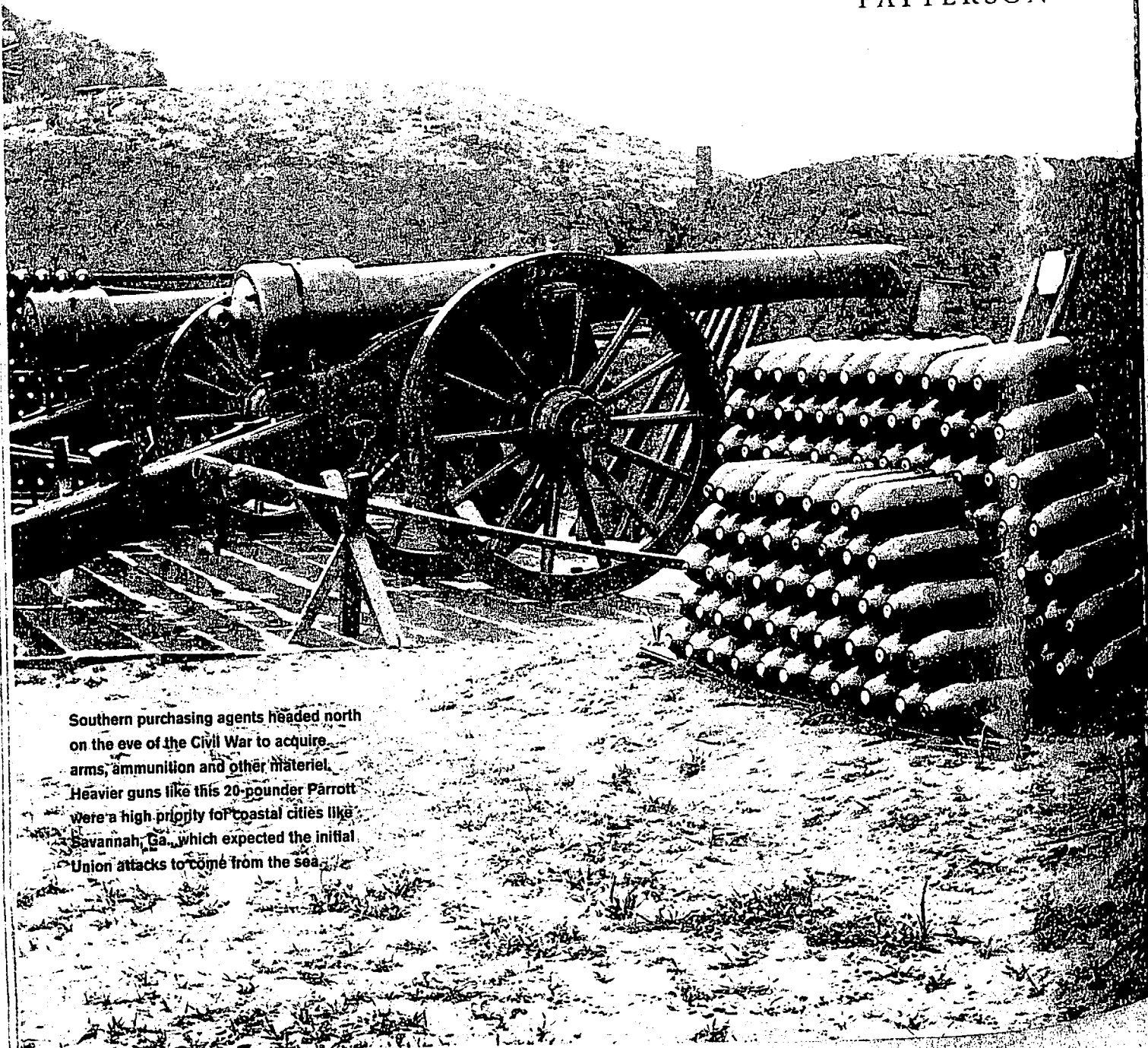


Arming the South With Guns From the North

Threats of war did little to hinder Southern arms buyers in New York City as the soon-to-be seceded states began preparing for the inevitable

by GERARD A. PATTERSON



Southern purchasing agents headed north on the eve of the Civil War to acquire arms, ammunition and other materiel. Heavier guns like this 20-pounder Parrott were a high priority for coastal cities like Savannah, Ga., which expected the initial Union attacks to come from the sea.

The specter of civil war loomed large in November 1860 when the fiery governor of Georgia, Joseph E. Brown, approached a middle-aged lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army with a unique opportunity. Brown hoped to recruit William J. Hardee to serve his home

state by taking a trip north to purchase desperately needed arms for the defense of Georgia when the inevitable hostilities began.

The governor, like so many other Southerners, was confident

that the prospect of profit would trump any concerns about sectional strife in the minds of most Northern arms suppliers. He also knew the pickings would be especially ripe in New York City, the largest and most diverse market for guns, ammunition and other war materiel anywhere in the Western Hemisphere.

Hardee found himself in an awkward predicament. His state had not yet seceded, and the Confederacy had yet to be formed. He had also served in the U.S. Army for more than 20 years and was one of its best-known officers. He graduated in West Point's Class of 1838 and was twice brevetted for gallantry during the Mexican War. Much of his fame, however, derived from his *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* manual, a highly respected training regimen for soldiers that would be widely used by both sides during the coming war and eventually be known simply as "Hardee's Tactics."

On leave of absence when Brown approached him, Hardee was due to report for service with the crack 1st Cavalry in Texas on February 1, 1861, and had just completed a long tour as commandant of cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. He described his dilemma in a November 24, 1860, letter to an old friend, Paul J. Semmes: "With every disposition to serve the state I felt great embarrassment in receiving a commission which might be regarded as inconsistent with my obligations to the Gen'l Government.... Besides, when it became known to the authorities in what capacity I was acting they might with propriety up the business by ordering me forthwith to any fort in the West."

Hardee, however, informed his friend that he had proposed a reasonable solution to the governor. "If he would appoint you

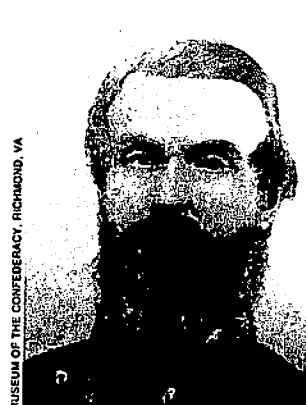
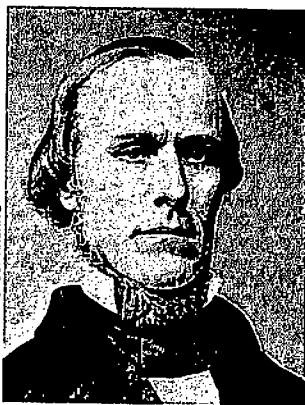
as the Agent of the state," he wrote to Semmes, "I would with pleasure accompany you to the North and give such aid to the purchase as I might be able."

Brown seemed delighted with the arrangement but was uncertain whether Semmes, a resident of Columbus, Ga., would accept the post. Primarily a banker and planter, Semmes had 15 years of military experience as captain of the Columbus Guards, a militia unit that routinely showed off its drilling prowess in national competitions. With Hardee's armament expertise and his own business acumen, Semmes could be counted on to make some sensible deals in New York with the \$1 million appropriation the state legislature had just ap-

proposed for the purchase of arms. Brown made it clear that one of their top priorities was the purchase of six 8-inch Columbiads and six 18-pounder guns intended "for the defense of Savannah, which is the only point on our seacoast that would be likely to suffer from the enemy's ships."

En route to New York the arms acquisition team stopped in Washington, D.C., and met with one of Hardee's West Point classmates, Major Henry C. Wayne, now on duty with the Quartermaster Department. Wayne told the two that 100 Sibley tents might be available for purchase from the government. Indeed, before they parted, Semmes asked Wayne "to have the accompanying letter conveyed to the Secretary of War." In it, Semmes made a formal request for "the privilege of being allowed to purchase" the tents "for the use of the militia of the state of Georgia."

Wayne, a native of Savannah, was more than happy to assist his fellow Georgians despite the peculiar circumstances of their visit. He himself would resign from the Army in



From left: Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown recruited William J. Hardee and Paul J. Semmes to buy weapons and supplies on behalf of their home state in the New York City arms market.

proved for weaponry. Hardee implored Semmes to sign on, telling him, "My dear friend, in these trying times you must make some sacrifices to serve your state, and you could not do it more certainly than by accepting this commission."

Within a week Semmes had been appointed state purchasing agent, and within two weeks he and Hardee were on their

a matter of weeks, eventually becoming adjutant and inspector general of Georgia and later a Confederate brigadier general.

Upon reaching New York, Semmes and Hardee set up shop at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, a massive six-story structure facing Madison Square that had opened only the year before. Over the next 16 days they would meet with a procession of representatives

from some of the best-known companies in the country. When it came to negotiating and signing contracts, Hardee—because of his active military status—apparently deferred to Semmes.

Amazingly, the Georgians were able to conduct their business somewhat openly, without interference from federal, state or

to Savannah. Lest Brown be concerned with how all these explosives were going to be stored, Semmes informed him in a follow-up letter: "Your Excellency will find herewith enclosed, a plan & specifications for a Powder magazine...which will hold when full 1250 barrels of 100 pounds of powder—furnished at my request

those made by Robbins & Lawrence for the British Government. Every one inspected by said Govt—Entirely new—never out of case since inspection—there is a great demand for these now but we thought best to mention to you before they were sold. Should you want them please let us know as early as you can."

"In spite of the efforts of the police authorities to prevent the shipment of a steamer has left this port since public attention was called to the subject, a

local authorities. On December 11, the "Arrivals in the City" column of *The New York Times* noted: "Lieut-Col. Hardee of the U.S. Army; G.P. Moores and lady of Baltimore; Col. Crocker of Milwaukee; C.B. Rundell and Paul J. Semmes, of the U.S. Army, are at the Fifth-avenue Hotel." Hardee was being open about his identity, but Semmes chose to disguise his true affiliation.

As soon as they were settled in, Semmes began an almost daily ritual of writing Brown at the state capital in Milledgeville in a businesslike manner, invariably "enclosing herewith" another contract he had signed. It was strictly one-way communication, as the governor thought it wise not to correspond with his emissary in New York.

Semmes attempted to address the need for artillery pieces when, on December 19, he contracted with Robert P. Parrott to buy 16 of the rifled cannons that bore his name—the soon-to-be famous Parrott Guns. The 1,000-pound cannons were to be cast at the supplier's foundry upstate. Included in the transaction were 3,500 rounds of solid shot and 4,000 shells, as well as 100,000 pounds of lead.

In notifying Brown of the deal, Semmes said "the rifle cannon is as yet an experiment" but insisted that "its marked superiority over the smooth bore is acknowledged by all." Ultimately the deal fell through. Parrott was one of the few Northern suppliers the Georgians would deal with who apparently had second thoughts before delivery was made.

The Parrott arrangement was petty compared to the one Semmes entered into the next day with E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. for tons of musket and cannon powder, cartridges and percussion caps, all to be delivered by ship from Philadelphia

by E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co. of Wilmington, Del., from whom the powder was purchased."

On December 21, the Colt manufacturing company of Hartford, Conn., was ready to meet Georgia's needs, agreeing to provide "300 of Colt's new model army pistols which are to be delivered on shipboard in two weeks." The company, Semmes let Brown know, "is now filling an order for several thousand of these pistols for the United States government at the price agreed by me."

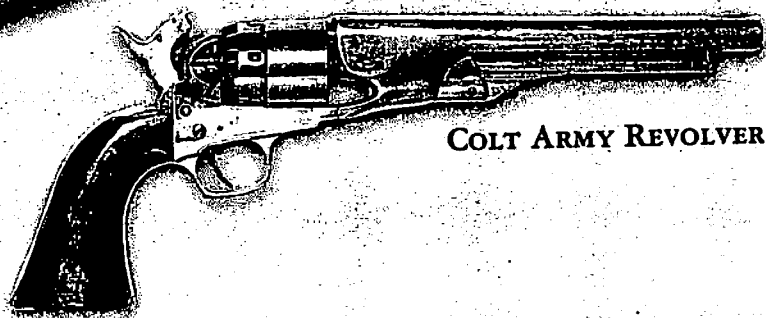
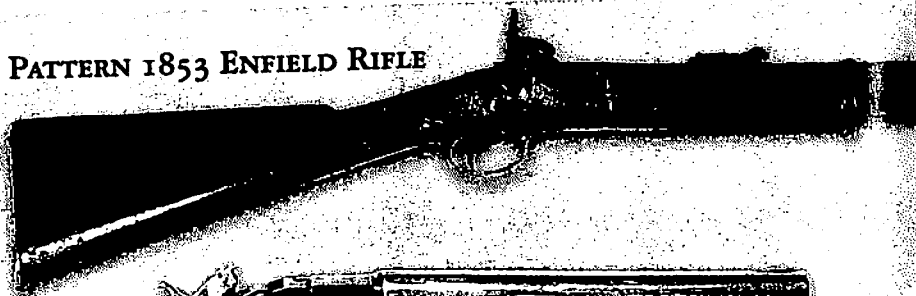
The next day Semmes had another contract to send, this one with the Augustus Veile Co. of West Troy, N.Y., for 18 siege gun carriages and a variety of artillery equipment, from horse harnesses to gun sights. At one point the purchasing agent was solicited by an aggressive supplier who addressed him in a note as "Genl Semmes" for some reason and informed him: "We have just got hold of 930 Enfield Rifles,

Semmes' Christmas present to Brown was a final contract signed with James T. Ames of Chicopee, Mass., for a huge shipment of cavalry sabers, haversacks, pistol pouches and other items.

For the entire period Semmes and Hardee were conducting their business from the hotel, they could—and likely did—start each day by scanning *The New York Times* for developments in the paper's headlines labeled "The Disunion Movement" and "The National Crisis." Almost daily there was some mention of what was occurring back in Georgia for Semmes, Hardee—and the Northern businessmen with whom they were dealing—to plainly see.

On December 11, the paper reported from Milledgeville that "Gov. Brown is out in a long letter favoring disunion." The next day a correspondent wrote from Columbus, "I have recently traveled throughout all the

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principal cities of Georgia and find the disunion feeling everywhere overwhelmingly in the ascendant."

None of the news had any significant effect on the Georgians' negotiations. They spent the holiday in Manhattan, and Semmes wrote Brown: "Col. Hardee & myself expect to leave for Richmond tomorrow

pointed out: "In spite of the efforts of the police authorities to prevent the shipment of arms and other war munitions to the South, not a steamer has left this port since public attention was called to the subject, without carrying more or less of these materials. The instructions recently issued to the police require them to keep a watchful

Access to Northern supplies became increasingly difficult once the war began. On April 14, 1861, two days after the firing on Fort Sumter, General Henry DuPont notified his company's agent in Virginia—who had just taken a large order for gunpowder—that "a new state of affairs has arisen." The corporate head told his representative: "Presuming that Virginia will do her whole duty in this great emergency and will be loyal to the Union, we shall prepare the powder, but with the understanding that should general expectation be disappointed and Virginia, by any misfortune, assume an attitude hostile to the United States, we shall be absolved from any obligation to furnish the order."

In further recognition of this "new state of affairs," according to William S. Dutton's definitive history of the DuPont company, "Southern agents were recalled, Southern orders canceled, powder in Southern magazines was written off the books." Representatives were given specific instructions "to sell not a pound of powder to buyers who might ship it surreptitiously into seceding States, which were bidding for powder at almost any price." All this activity came, of course, several months after Semmes had placed his order with DuPont, and what effect it might have had on that agreement, if any, is unclear.

Hardee resigned his U.S. Army commission on January 31 and went on to serve as an outstanding corps commander in the Army of Tennessee. After the war, he became a planter in Selma, Ala., and died in 1873. Semmes eventually took the field as well, serving as a successful brigadier in the Army of Northern Virginia. He was wounded while leading a charge on July 2, 1863, at Gettysburg and died eight days later.

Despite their respective successes in the field, Hardee and Semmes' time in New York may have been their most valuable contribution to the Southern cause. Confederate battlefield victories depended in part on supplies of Northern arms, particularly in the early stages of the war. Northern guns in Southern hands, a phenomenon that resulted from the tireless efforts of men such as Semmes, Hardee and other Southern agents, was an unlikely combination that very nearly destroyed the Union. **CWT**

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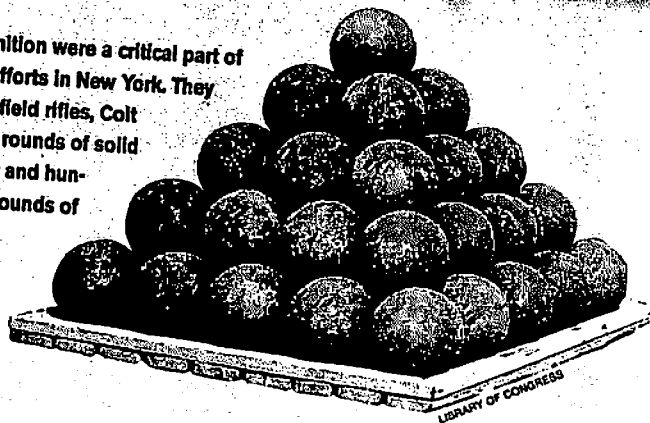
row morning—where we will conclude our day—then return immediately to Georgia." Not a man to waste any opportunity, Semmes spent a few hours in Richmond with Joseph R. Anderson, negotiating the purchase of six 18-pounder guns and ammunition from the Tredegar Iron Works.

Finally arriving back in Columbus on January 3, Semmes immediately went to work preparing an accounting of his acquisitions for Brown. With a banker's precision, he reported the total to the penny—\$93,596.35. Just how much of what Brown's trade delegation purchased was actually delivered to Savannah is uncertain. Theirs were by no means the only arms purchases being made for shipment South.

On January 25—more than four weeks after Semmes and Hardee left, and a week after Georgia's secession—the *Times* startled its readers with the headlines "More Aid and Comfort" and "Wholesale Shipment of Arms to the South." As the article

eye on all vessels about sailing for Southern ports, and to notify the superintendent whenever any arms, cartridges or other articles contraband of war are discovered going on board. In order to evade this espionage of the police, these shipments are always deferred until almost the last moment of the vessel's hour of departure. The goods are then hurried down to the pier, the shipper gives a wink to the Purser and perhaps a quarter each to the stevedores, when the boxes of 'Hardware' are speedily hoisted on board, the fasts are let go, or cut and the guns have gone off."

One of the problems authorities in New York faced in trying to block shipments at this stage was that Brown and other Southern governors threatened to retaliate by seizing Northern merchant vessels in their ports. Consequently, the commerce continued almost unobstructed until the Confederacy was formally established in February and a stiff ban was imposed on trafficking.



Small arms and ammunition were a critical part of Hardee and Semmes' efforts in New York. They negotiated deals for Enfield rifles, Colt revolvers, thousands of rounds of solid shot and shells, powder and hundreds of thousands of pounds of lead for making bullets.