



### Pierce Butler and Charles Ingersoll

By Michael Karpyn

The cases of Pierce Butler and Charles Ingersoll represent the mixed political loyalties and uneasy bounds of free speech found in Philadelphia during the Civil War. Both men were native Philadelphians, but their esteemed families carried both strong political and financial connections to the South.

Pierce Mease Butler, born in 1810, was the grandson of Major Piece Butler, a veteran of the American Revolution, U.S. Senator from South Carolina and signer of the Constitution. Though he favored the stronger federal government created by the Constitution, he also fought to protect the practice of slavery. As the owner of two plantations in Georgia, the senior Butler had a vested financial interest in the continuation of this practice. At the time of his death in 1812, Butler owned 638 slaves and was one of the wealthiest men in the United States.

Pierce Butler, born, raised and a resident of Philadelphia, appeared to carry little of the personal discipline and business sense exhibited by his grandfather. Though he received a steady income from the plantations inherited by his grandfather, he squandered much of this fortune through gambling and risky investments. His marriage to the British actress Fanny Kemble dissolved into a bitter year long divorce in 1848. Though it is arguable that the personalities of Butler and Kemble were not compatible, a large part of the couple's rift had to do with the practice of slavery. While Butler was a supporter of the institution that had contributed to his grandfather's fortune, Kemble was becoming an ardent abolitionist. A trip to her husband's plantations in 1838 led her to write and publish the *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, a detailed and critical expose of a Southern plantation.

Butler's financial situation became so dire that three of his friends – including George Cadwalader and Charles Henry Fisher – were appointed to oversee his finances. Though he sold many of his properties in Philadelphia, his large debts still necessitated the sale of over 400 of his slaves in 1859.

After his divorce and the sale of his slaves, Butler kept his loyalties to the South as the nation neared Civil War. He publicly resigned his commission with Philadelphia's First City Calvary Troop, and traveled to the South in 1860 and 1861. He returned to Philadelphia in the summer of 1861 and did not return to the South until after the war. He died from malaria at his Georgia plantation in 1867.

Charles Ingersoll was another son of a prominent Philadelphia family. His grandfather, Jared Ingersoll Jr., was also a signer of the Constitution and his father Charles

Ingersoll, Sr. was an esteemed lawyer and a member of the U.S Congress from 1837 to 1849. The political history of the senior Ingersoll provides a fascinating look at the partisan party politics of the 1800s and gives key insight into his son's political activities. Originally a member of the Federalist party, the senior Ingersoll gradually broke ranks with the party and became a partisan Democrat. This affiliation sometimes rankled Philadelphia society, especially when Ingersoll opposed the renewal of the charter of the second Bank of the United States.

Charles Jr., born in 1805, followed in his father's footsteps, graduating from the University of Pennsylvania law school in 1822 and establishing himself as a successful attorney. He also shared his father's active interest in politics and political beliefs.

The political beliefs of the younger Ingersoll represent the unique attitudes towards the South found in Philadelphia prior to the Civil War. Strong social and political ties connected Philadelphia to the South. The Philadelphia political establishment, which was overwhelmingly Democratic, often mirrored the political positions of the South, especially on the issue of slavery. Philadelphia's Democrats, for example, opposed popular sovereignty for the Kansas Territory, supported the Lecompton Constitution, and even endorsed a fugitive slave code for the territories in 1857. As the election of 1860 neared, Philadelphia's Democrats supported the pro-Southern candidacy of John C. Breckinridge for president. Charles Ingersoll, Jr., as far back as the 1840s, supported the institution of slavery and placed fault for the growing conflict between North and South in the actions of the abolitionist movement. Like many wealthy Philadelphia Democrats, Ingersoll supported Breckinridge's presidential campaign and kept his pro-southern sentiments even as the nation veered towards civil war. Though he opposed the eventual secession of the Southern States, Ingersoll felt strongly that their return to the Union should be negotiated, not coerced. When the war broke out in 1861, Ingersoll kept his fervent opposition to the war private. The initial burst of patriotism and support of the Lincoln administration had led to the destruction of several businesses and threats directed towards those suspected of holding southern sympathies.

The carnage of the war and the prospect of the abolition of slaves ended any semblance of political unity in Philadelphia. Partisan Democrats such as Ingersoll saw an opportunity to regain political power. He began to energetically campaign for democratic majorities in state and federal governments to initiate an end to the war.

In August of 1862, Philadelphia Democrats held their first mass political meeting of the war. Though there was support expressed for the preservation of the Union, there was also some protest against abolition and the revocation of habeas corpus. There was, however, only one speaker at this meeting that went far enough to directly criticize Lincoln and the conduct of the war – Charles Ingersoll.