

South Carolina: The Point Zero Two Percent

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Summary

One hundred and sixty-nine white men, 0.02% of the population of South Carolina, signed the secession document which ignited the American Civil War. They came from a racial-economic demographic segment of less than four percent of the state's population. This segment owned more than sixty percent of the state's population as slaves. The signers were elected by less than one-fifth of the state's population. More than ninety percent of the signers were too old to be drafted into fighting. Eighty-six percent of the signers survived the war; many continued to operate their plantations as sharecropping plantations employing their former slaves.

The South Carolina secession signers—their decision and its consequences

In recent years, the phrase “the one percent” has been used to denote the very richest segment of the American population. By 2011, the “One Percent”, was garnering almost 25% of the nation's income each year, and controlled 40% of the nation's wealth. *(1)*

Let us explore a different percentage—the 0.02% of South Carolinians that voted to secede from the United States on December 20, 1860. By signing their names to a document named the Ordinance of Secession, these 169 men lit the fuse that ignited the American Civil War.

They believed, correctly, that other southern states would join them. They also believed that the Federal government would not fight to maintain the Union and that, if it did, the Federalists (the North) would not win. They were wrong, and their decision to sign had dramatic consequences. The Federal government did fight to keep the country unified. The resulting war lasted five years and killed more Americans than all of America's other wars combined. The latest and most comprehensive scientific study concludes that the war killed 752,000 people in total, and perhaps as many as 851,000. *(2)*

When the war ended, South Carolina and its allied states were in ruins. The signers lost wealth and power, but they regained much of it when they were allowed to keep much of their land and to lease the farmland to sharecroppers (their former slaves). The social and economic consequences of their decision to sign are still evident in the United States more than a century and a half later.

The signers—racial, political, and economic demographics

The 169 men who voted to secede were the elected representatives of a state population of more than 703,000. They constituted 0.02% of the population. On a per capita basis, each was signing for the future of 4,164 people.

The signers were white, which put them in the racial minority. Nearly sixty percent of the state's residents were black, and the vast majority of those were slaves.

South Carolina population, 1860 (3)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
White	291,300	41.4%
Slave (black)	402,406	57.2%
Free black	9,914	1.4%
Other	88	0.0%
Total	703,708	100.0%

The South Carolina Constitution of 1790 was in effect. It limited the right to vote to a small minority and the right to be elected to an even smaller group. It was designed so that the legislature would consist of the very wealthiest of the state's citizens, and so that one group, plantation owners from the Low Country/Charleston region, would dominate the legislature.

Only white men could vote or hold office. Women generally slightly outnumber men in populations but, for simplicity, let us assume they were equal in numbers. If the population was half male, half female, then in 1860 there were 145,650 white men, or 20.7% of the population. Thus, at most, only one out of five residents of the state could ever become eligible to elect the signers.

But, not all white men could vote. Article I, Section 4 of the constitution provided that only white males 21 and over could vote, and only if they owned 50+ acres or a town lot, or paid a substantial fee. The constitution was amended in 1810 so that paupers and state citizens who were non-commissioned officers and private-rank soldiers in the US Army could not vote. (4)

So, if you were a white woman, or a white man who was under 21, or poor, or in a low-ranking army position, you could not vote. Only white men with enough money or land could vote.

The right to be elected was even more restricted than the right to vote. To be elected to the South Carolina legislature, either into the House of Representatives or into the State Senate, a man needed substantial land and slave assets, or a large net worth. A man could be elected representative of a district in which he did not live, if he was wealthy enough. To become governor (elected by the legislature, not by the public), he had to be one of the very wealthiest individuals in the state, which meant owning large plantations and numerous slaves.

The following table lays out the requirements to vote and to hold state office:

*Requirements to vote or hold office,
from state constitution of 1790, and adjusted to indicate equivalent current values (5)*

	Personal net worth, in British pounds sterling (£)	1791 dollars	Equivalent value in 2014 dollars		
			Consumer Price Index— shows purchase power	On GDP/capita index— shows status relative to other people	Relative share of GDP— shows economic power of the individual
<i>To vote</i>					
Pay local taxes of 3 shillings		\$ 68	\$ 1,780	\$ 73,300	\$ 5,780,000
<i>To be elected to house of representatives</i>					
If resident in district: own 500 acres and ten slaves	£ 150	\$ 683	\$ 17,800	\$ 733,000	\$ 57,800,000
If not resident in district	£ 500	\$ 2,275	\$ 59,200	\$ 2,440,000	\$ 193,000,000
<i>To be elected to state senate</i>					
If resident in district	£ 300	\$ 1,365	\$ 33,500	\$ 1,470,000	\$ 116,000,000
If not resident in district	£ 1000	\$ 4,550	\$ 118,000	\$ 4,890,000	\$ 385,000,000
<i>To be elected governor</i>					
(chosen by legislature)	£ 1500	\$ 6,825	\$ 178,000	\$ 7,330,000	\$ 578,000,000

There were 26,701 people in South Carolina who owned slaves. (6) A few women owned slaves, as did a tiny number of free blacks, but almost all slaves were owned by white men.

Wealth was concentrated in slave owners, but not all whites owned slaves. Assuming for convenience that all slave owners were white, the percentage of whites who owned slaves was 26,701/291,300, or just over 9%. Thus, almost 91% of whites could not be elected to state office, either because they didn't own slaves or because they were women.

Looking at it another way, the percentage of the state's total population that owned slaves was 26,701/703,708, or 3.8%. Ninety-six percent of the state's population either was enslaved or did not own slaves. This means that the signers of the secession document came from a demographic segment consisting of less than 4% of the population.

The signers—conscription, fighting, and survival (7)

As the war began, the secession signers passed legislation making all healthy white men between the ages of 18 and 35 subject to conscription into the new army. As the war progressed, the upper limit was raised to 45. More than 90% of the signers were too old to be forced into army service, as shown below:

Age distribution of the signers in 1860

Of conscription age 18-35 (born 1825 or later)	12	7%
Too old for conscription into army (over 35)	157	93%
50 or older	82	49%
60 or older	29	17%
70 or older	4	2%

In South Carolina, about 13,000 soldiers of fighting age died during the Civil War. This represents about 25% of that age group, or one out of every four men age 18-35. The death rate among the signers was lower. By the time the war ended in 1865, almost nine out of ten of the signers were still alive, as shown below:

Fates of the signers

Died in battle	6	4%
Died of other causes by 1865	17	10%
Outlived the war	146	86%

Sources

- (1) <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>
- (2) Hacker, J.D. 2011. A Census-based count of the Civil War dead. *Civil War History*, Vol. 57, No. 4, pp. 307-348.
- (3) U.S. Census, 1860.
- (4) South Carolina Constitution of 1790.
- (5) Calculations performed at www.measuringworth.com. For a detailed discussion of the meaning of various relative worth measures over time, see <http://www.measuringworth.com/indicator.php>
- (6) From http://www.civil-war.net/pages/1860_census.html
- (7) Derived from http://www.scsignersmonument.com/uploads/1/1/1/3/11138150/secession_men_list-2.pdf