

# “TREASON AND INSURRECTION”



## “Treason and Insurrection”

### Introduction

In December 1860, following the November election of Abraham Lincoln to the office of President of the United States, South Carolina became the first slave-holding state that seceded from the Union. By February 1, 1861, six more Southern slave-holding states seceded. On February 8, 1861, the seven rebel states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas) formed the Confederate States of America, known also as the Confederacy. After the first shots at Fort Sumter were fired on April 12, 1861, four other states joined Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The eleven states were determined to preserve their slave-holding privileges.

That does not mean, however, that all white Southerners supported the Confederacy and its cause. While some did not agree with the official stand of the Confederacy but remained passive, others engaged in secret activities to fight against the Confederacy in the seceded South. One such initiative was the Arkansas Peace Society, a loose affiliation of anti-Confederate groups established shortly after Arkansas seceded from the Union. Those groups were usually secret because Confederates, who represented the majority of white Southerners, believed their members were traitors. The secret anti-Confederate groups in Arkansas were particularly popular in northern counties, where slavery was not as crucial to the economy as in other parts of the state. They did not last long, however. Most were disbanded already at the end of 1861 when the persecution of their members resulted in large-scale arrests.

In this activity, you will examine a letter that John Rice Homer Scott wrote to one of his fellow Confederate officers. In it, Scott discusses how the Arkansas Peace Society operated and what men like Scott – loyal to the Confederate cause – thought of anti-Confederate organizations. Although Scott was the great enemy of anti-Confederates, his letter allows us to reconstruct how these secret societies functioned in the South, where their activities were considered, in Scott’s words, “treason and insurrection.”

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CENTER FOR ARKANSAS  
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(Copy)

Head Quarter Battalion  
Ark. Cavalry Volunteers  
Camp Bulloden  
Carroll County Ark.  
Decr. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1861.

General,

I have under arrest (and daily making more) some thirty-five or forty men positively proven to belong to a secret society held together by secret signs tokens pass words and under the penalty of "Death" should one of their members reveal the same.

I have been enabled from their own confessions upon each other to obtain their oaths signs, tokens & words &c

I conceive the organization to be of Northern origin having in view the subjugation of the South!

It breaths treason and insurrection of the most conclusive and positive nature.

Some of the most important signs, tokens &c are given thus (from their own statements)

~~A~~ member when leaving home was to suspend from his door or window a piece of "yellow ribbon, calico or paper" to distinguish them as members and as a token "that if a friend or the Northern Army came along that his property & family would <sup>not</sup> be molested by seeing and finding this sign at his door.

Another token was to say "Secession" which if recognized by a member would be answered

Letter by John Rice Homer Scott, December 3, 1861 (John Rice Homer Scott Collection, 1836-1895)

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by saying "In the Southern Confederacy"  
Another token  
or word on reading up to a members house  
was to say "Dark night" if the proprietor was  
a member he would answer, "It will be  
darker before day" But if there was a secession-  
ist or an enemy in the house he would  
answer in order to caution his friend of their  
being there & that he should be on his guard.  
"Perhaps it will be darker in the morning"  
There was an  
other to be used in camp which some termed a  
Camp signal and by which it appears some  
members (to blind the South) were to volunteer  
& go into the army of the South and there  
work our destruction, this signal word now or  
taken was to "Hoot like an owl" which was  
to be answered by the "Howl of a wolf"  
there are several others named.  
This Society was  
called by some of them a "peace party" or  
"peace society" or to unite the friends of Peace.  
The  
first signal was to place the forefingers of  
the right hand upon the nose twice, & then let  
it fall to the side of the body. The answer to  
this was to take and place the two forefingers  
of the right hand separated on the throat under  
the chin & draw them down twice to the breast  
& then letting their hands fall down to the side. The  
2<sup>nd</sup> sign was to "pull with the two forefingers of the right  
hand the shirt collar & then buttoned around the throat twice

Letter by John Rice Homer Scott, December 3, 1861, p. 2 (John Rice Homer Scott Collection, 1836-1895)



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As if to relieve if it bound the neck to the  
& then letting the hand fall to the side. The  
answer to this was "to open the palm of the right  
hand and placing it upon the left breast then  
letting it fall to the side. These are a good  
many other signs, but these are the main &  
important ones, all corresponding very well in  
their statements on examination before the Judge  
of the County Court and a Justice of the peace  
holding their court at my Camp especially called  
to examine into it.

This Society or organization  
numbers several hundred and extends through  
Fulton, Grand Searcy, Newton, Van Buren, parts of  
Conway Pope Marion & Carroll Counties. There has  
been nearly one hundred arrested in Clinton, Van  
Buren Co. Berryville in Searcy County, and I  
have arrested thirty five or forty in Marion Searcy  
Newton & Carroll Counties, all around my  
Camp and are daily making them it  
seems almost universal in certain localities.

I do think that the Contract ought  
to have been let out for building our cabins to  
winter in we need not go north to find our  
enemies they are all around we bound together  
by solemn oaths secret oaths &c. Some of the  
prisoners have stated it was an understanding  
that if the Northern Army did give your command  
before them that this Squadron would have been  
attacked or that they would "lay such hands" &  
if I made or attempted to arrest persons in  
certain places after I commenced making them &

Letter by John Rice Homer Scott, December 3, 1861, p. 3 (John Rice Homer Scott Collection, 1836-1895)

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their plans &c. were advised, that they would  
"give me a fight" &c.

I think it would  
be advisable to station some of the Companies of  
my command in Miles Cove Beany County, there  
is a Camp meeting ground with some good  
buildings a very large Harbor and near on in  
vicinity of this secret society &c. I think Capt.  
Boon is in the vicinity of County of the same kind  
of men, but fear not able to procure winter quarters  
convenient, I am in favor hopes I may be permitted  
to station the Companies, if found necessary separately  
in the most unaffected and unobjectionable  
or adjoining Counties within reach or days ride  
from my head Qrs. It will be better in giving the  
use of buildings in part now erected at certain  
points by religious Societies & in neighborhoods where  
protection would be needed &c.

I should take the  
liberty of acting as I have suggested hoping it  
may meet your approval. Should I receive  
no answer in time to the application and  
circumstances shall require it in my  
judgment.

I am in very Respectfully  
your Obedt Servant  
 Maj Gen B. McClellan      Mr R. H. Homer Scott Capt  
 Comdg Western Division      Comdg Battalion  
 C. S. A.      C. S. A.  
 Fayetteville  
 A. R. O.

Letter by John Rice Homer Scott, December 3, 1861, p. 4 (John Rice Homer Scott Collection, 1836-1895)

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### Questions:

1. Who wrote the letter and when?
2. What type of “secret society” does the letter’s author discuss? See “Introduction” for more information.
3. Secret anti-Confederate organizations were distinctly created in the Southern Confederate states. That was because, in other states, individuals did not have to hide their anti-Confederate views. Why do you think Scott writes that the organization that he discusses was “of Northern origin,” which is not accurate?
4. Why do you think Scott believes that the organization that he discusses “breaths Treason and insurrection of the most conclusive and positive nature”?
5. How did the secret organization discussed in this letter operate? What kind of signs and secret signals did its members use to convey various messages?
6. What does Scott mean when he writes that some members of the secret organization “were to volunteer & go into the army of the South and there work our destruction”?
7. Where did the secret organization concentrate in Arkansas? Locate these counties on a map. If possible, use a map from 1861.
8. What else do we learn about the secret society from Scott’s letter?
9. How could Scott’s point of view (i.e., his views and beliefs) shape his description of the secret organization that he discusses in this letter?
10. How did Scott obtain all the information about the secret organization that he discusses? See the first lines of the letter for important information.
11. Although Scott opposed anti-Confederate groups and considered them treasonous, his letter allows us to study their history. Why do you think we can learn so much about those secret organizations from the letter of an enemy of such organizations?