



The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Va.

Ambrose Dudley Mann

Diplomat of the lost cause

by Hubert Leroy

Translated into English by Gerald Hawkins

When one evokes the American Civil War and its political implications with Belgium, one name stands out, that of Ambrose Dudley Mann, commissioner of the Confederate States of America for Belgium and the Vatican. According to Belgian history professor Francis Balace, “*he was quite a curious character*”.

Ambrose Dudley Mann was born in Hanover Court House on April 26, 1801, from an ancestral Virginia family. After spending a part of his youth in the Old Dominion State, young Ambrose moved with his family to Kentucky where he continued his studies. In 1823, he was admitted to the Military Academy of West Point where he was apparently a hard-working cadet. However, some time before graduating, he suddenly resigned after having second thoughts on the sedentary aspect of military life. Back in Kentucky, he decided to study law and later married Hebe Grayson Carter from Virginia. From this union was born a son, Grayson “Willy” who, like his father, would also become a lawyer.

In 1830, while practicing law in Owingsville, Mann ventured into a commercial partnership that was apparently a flop since in 1834, he sold his business shares as well as his house to relocate in Greenup County where incredibly, he repeated his failed experiment! In addition to law and business, A.D. Mann also entered in politics by joining the Democratic Party. His total commitment to the party helped him rise to a certain fame that opened the doors of a diplomatic career. In 1842, President John Tyler appointed him consul of the United States in Bremen (Germany). At that time, this port was one of the most important in Europe. Mann excelled in his functions on the old continent and held various positions, notably in Hungary and Switzerland. During all those years, he was a good commercial negotiator and the signatory of many treaties.

Mann then returned to the United States and in 1853, he was appointed the first ever Assistant Secretary of State, position that he held until 1855. A Whig and strong defendant of the *States Rights*, he got involved in the pro-Southern press by publishing articles in *Debow's Review* wherein he preached the economic independence of the South and the creation of a merchant navy. The idea of creating a Southern merchant fleet, although popular and having many backers, proved impossible to achieve not only for organization reasons but also because of the lack of co-operation and confidence of the authorities as well of the population.

During those years, Mann impressed War Secretary Jefferson F. Davis and a solid friendship developed between the two men. In 1861, at the time of the formation of the

Confederate States of America of which Davis became president, it proved urgent that the South be officially recognized by the European powers. A first joint diplomatic commission was consequently organized. It was composed of three commissioners: Pierre A. Rost of Louisiana, William L. Yancey of Alabama and Ambrose D. Mann whose nomination had been dictated by Jefferson Davis. In addition to the friendship between the two men, the Confederate president had total confidence in Mann whose loyalty towards the Southern cause needed no further demonstration. Moreover, the various missions carried out in Europe by the ex-consul had retained his attention for a long time. The assignment given to Mann, of a diplomatic nature, was not limited to a mere representation and commercial role. Far more important, it consisted in lobbying the European powers to such an extent that they would recognize the new nation that had seceded and was at war.

Having received his instructions from the Confederate Secretary of State, Robert Toombs, the new commissioner did not leave the American continent discreetly via Washington and New York as initially planned. Instead, he visited the federal capital to get an idea of the state of mind that prevailed there. This episode that underlines the unconsciousness and somewhat provocative side of our character, nearly ended with his arrest by federal agents since the presence of Mann did not go unnoticed! Thanks to the influence of one of his friends, Henry S. Lane, senator of Indiana, who personally took the matter to President Abraham Lincoln, the irresponsible Confederate emissary was allowed to continue his journey to New York, in spite of the protests of some eminent members of the federal government. This was a curious outcome indeed, considering the situation at that time, but it should not really come as a surprise since the three above characters had one thing in common: all were competent lawyers! Finally, on March 30, Mann sailed for Europe.

During nearly one year, our commissioner remained in Great Britain where he was active in the local press and meddled in other European agencies whose echoes were generally favorable to the South. However, neither Mann nor Yancey or Rost managed to obtain any official recognition of the Confederate States. In addition to the frustration of the three Southern representatives who were trying hard to meet the common objective, Richmond set up in 1862 a new diplomatic mission composed of James Mason in London and John Slidell in Paris. William Yancey returned home where, in March 1862, he was elected to the Confederate Senate. Pierre Rost was sent to Madrid where he held the same function and Ambrose Mann became the Confederate representative in Brussels.

If Mann had met with some success on the Old Continent before the American Civil War, those were now just old memories. In spite of his many writings and the meetings held with politicians, such as Prime Minister Charles Rogier, Davis' envoy failed to obtain the official recognition of the Confederacy by King Leopold I and his government even though, semi-officially, the Belgian monarch was favorable to the South.

Relations between Mann and Judah P. Benjamin were not exactly cordial. Mann demanded to the Secretary of State that his mission be extended to cover Switzerland, the Netherlands and Italy, however, he only managed to secure a short assignment with the Danish government. J. P. Benjamin, a man of many qualities, had learned to read between the lines of the exaggerated content of the reports that he received from Brussels. Quite often, Mann, without going through the official channels, referred directly to president Davis, a procedure that often put his boss in an awkward position.

In November 1863, mandated by Benjamin, Mann was sent to the Vatican to hand over to Pope Pius IX a letter from the Confederate President requesting papal intervention to prevent the recruitment of volunteers for the Union army from the German and Irish catholic underworld. Moreover, Mann still kept hoping for an official recognition of the Confederacy by the Vatican. Accompanied by his son, he met the Pope on November 13 and with his usual wit, he tried during nearly forty minutes to convince the Holy Father to join his cause.

Pius IX listened carefully and informed Mann that he would give his response as soon as possible. Sometime later, via cardinal Antonelli, he gave Mann a letter that was intended for President Davis. With his usual gullibility, Mann exulted since he was convinced that the Pope's letter was finally the much awaited recognition. He changed his tune when J. P. Benjamin informed him that the dispatch from Rome was simply a polite note without any implication from the Vatican authorities.

At times frustrated, at times full of drive with a pompous sense of exaggeration, Mann pursued his missions without glory until the twilight of the Southern adventure. Before leaving Richmond for Europe in 1861, Mann had sworn never not return on American soil until the South had become fully independent. In 1865, after the collapse of the Confederacy, Mann left Brussels and moved to Paris where he worked as a journalist, sometimes signing his articles as "Colonel Mann", a reminiscence of the pre-war days when he was a member of a Kentucky militia.

In the French capital, he had entries to the closed circles of the aristocracy and other elitist salons. He was regarded as the senior of Americans living in Paris. Appreciated for his loyalty and friendship, his apartment became the meeting place of old Confederates passing through France, among whom Jefferson and Varina Davis at the time of their European trip. His children also visited him frequently. He had a second residence in Chantilly where he hosted guests and friends and where Marie, his faithful cook, contributed to the fame of his house. He maintained a thorough correspondence with his former compatriots and even began writing his memoirs, which to date do not seem to have been published.

Mann continued this lifestyle to the end, never forgetting the South for which he had invested so much of energy, but met with little success. He died in November 1889 in Paris. Since many years, historians and researchers have tried in vain to locate his grave. The date of Mann's death, November 15, 1889, was announced in the obituary page of the newspaper *Journal des Débats* of November 16. There is some confusion as to the exact date because of some documents mentioning November 19 or 20 and also the erroneous inscription on the tomb of the Confederate emissary.

For a long time, I have been trying to locate the place where Mann rests. On March 25, 2008, after much frustration, I finally discovered his burial place in the cemetery of Montparnasse in Paris. One should know that the administration of the Parisian Cemeteries is rather intricate and not always inclined to help historians and other researchers. Mails often remain unanswered.

During my investigations and further to numerous phone calls with this administration, I finally came into contact with a motivated civil servant to whom I explained the purpose of my research. This good soul, who did not wish to give me her name, painstakingly consulted the archives and finally informed me that Ambrose Dudley Mann had been buried on January 2, 1890, that is to say one and a half month after his death. Seeing my astonishment, she added that his body had remained in the American church of Paris, probably waiting for an available space in a nearby cemetery.

She also pointed out that, to find a grave, it was necessary to know the exact date of burial in addition to that of death.

And so I finally found the grave of our Confederate commissioner. It is in good condition and located in an area of the cemetery where rest many personalities. A myth persisted for some time saying that Mann ended his life in poverty and forgotten by all, and that his body had probably been interred in a common grave. This tale never convinced me.

They are four Confederates resting in the Paris area. This list is not exhaustive.

- Judah P. Benjamin - cemetery of Père Lachaise (Paris),
- John Slidell - communal cemetery of Villejuif,
- François A. Le Mat - cemetery of Passy (Paris),
- Ambrose D. Mann - cemetery of Montparnasse (Paris).

Sources

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