# The Story of Virginia: An American Experience

A Long-term Exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society

http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/confederates.htm

## Becoming Confederates

Virginians were optimistic through most of the 1850s. Turnpikes, canals, and railroads linked eastern and western Virginia in new ways, and a constitutional convention in 1850–51 eased the state's longstanding east-west antagonisms. The economy grew vigorously from its depressed condition in the 1830s. But the issue of slavery would not go away.

### Prelude to War

The Compromise of 1850 brought trouble rather than peace to Virginia. Its call for the return of fugitive slaves inflamed sectional feelings and involved Virginia because of its proximity to free states, to which slaves might escape. The lawsuit of a Virginia-born slave, Dred Scott—who claimed freedom because his master had taken him to free soil—produced a storm of controversy. In 1857, the Supreme Court denied that such movement made Scott free. It ruled that he was neither a citizen nor had any right to sue, and it held that Congress had no right to ban slavery in the nation's western territories. Many white Virginians were reassured, believing that the tide was turning their way. They would soon be disillusioned.

In October 1859 John Brown, an abolitionist, seized the federal armory at Harpers Ferry in northern Virginia in order to arm a vast slave rebellion. He reasoned that slaves throughout the South would rise up once they were assured of having weapons. Nothing of the kind happened. Federal troops killed some of Brown's associates, and Brown himself was captured and hanged. What angered the South was the North's reaction. Many northerners considered Brown a martyr. Some wished he had succeeded. White Virginians began to wonder if they were safe within the Union.

### Declension and Secession

There was only one remaining national institution that had not broken up on North-South lines—the Democratic Party. But in 1860, its northern faction, which nominated Stephen Douglas of Illinois for president, split from its southern faction, which nominated John G. Breckinridge of Kentucky. For the first time, Virginia did not vote Democratic, favoring instead John G. Bell of the new Constitutional Union Party. The Democrats' split ensured the election of the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, who carried only northern states. In Virginia he won votes only in counties that soon would become West Virginia.

Following Lincoln's election, seven southern states seceded, fearful for the future of slavery. Virginia was not among them. During the "secession winter" of 1860–61, white Virginians struggled with their competing allegiances. They were proud to be Americans but for decades had also thought of themselves as southerners. Most decided that they would stay with the Union if it did not attack the seceded states. But, if war came, rather than fight fellow

southerners, Virginia would leave the Union too. The convention that met in Richmond in early 1861 to consider Virginia's role within the nation was overwhelmingly unionist. But it was a highly conditional unionism, and within days of the fighting at Fort Sumter, the convention voted to secede.

## Taking Sides

On April 17, General Winfield Scott, Virginia-born hero of the War of 1812 and captor of Mexico City in the Mexican War, offered command of the U.S. Army to Robert E. Lee. Lee declined on the grounds that he could not participate in what he called "an invasion of the southern states." Scott said that if Lee could not command U.S. troops he should resign his commission. He did, explaining, "If Virginia stands by the old Union, so will I. But, if she secedes (though I do not believe in secession as a constitutional right, or that there is sufficient cause for revolution), then I will still follow my native State with my sword, and if need be with my life."

Lee believed he was defending Virginia, not slavery. But slavery lay behind Virginia's action. The commonwealth voted to leave the Union because Virginians refused to use force against the other southern states that had already seceded. And those states had seceded because they feared they could no longer trust the federal government to safeguard states' rights and southern institutions, especially slavery. Some Confederates said they were defending their way of life, but it was slavery that was the most distinctive thing about southern society. Others said they were defending their liberties, but these principally included the liberty to maintain slavery.

Most Confederate soldiers owned no slaves and believed they were repelling aggression against the freely expressed will of the white people of Virginia. In 1776, Virginians had maintained that the consent of the governed lay in Williamsburg, not London. Now they argued it lay in Richmond, not Washington. One Virginia private, when asked by a Union soldier why he was fighting, answered "Because you're down here." To many today, however, it evades the fact that without slavery, none of the rest would have happened.

## Capital of the Confederacy

Once Virginia seceded, the Confederates moved their capital from Montgomery, Alabama, to Richmond. This reflected both the material importance of Virginia to the war effort—it still was the most populous southern state and had the most industry—and the psychological symbolism of Virginia's association with the earlier war of independence. Both sides claimed to be heirs of the American Revolution. The Confederacy identified with the colonies in 1776 and emphasized liberty, local self-determination, and independence. The United States, by contrast, stressed not the causes of the Revolution but its results—a legacy of nationhood and founding ideals of equality.

The fateful decision to make Richmond the Confederate capital determined that much of the war would be fought in Virginia. Some Confederates and later historians believed that moving the capital was a mistake because it placed undue emphasis on defending Richmond to the neglect of the West, where the war was really lost.

The first effort by a Union army to capture Richmond met defeat near Manassas on July 21, 1861. But the resources of both sides were great enough to survive a single defeat. The Union

occupied Arlington and Alexandria for the duration of the conflict. It also wrested control of fifty Unionist counties in western Virginia, which then seceded from Virginia to form West Virginia.

The second Union effort to capture Richmond—the Peninsula campaign—aimed at attacking Richmond from the southeast. Its commander, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, slowly reached the outskirts of the city. Meanwhile, Maj. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson (who had earned his nickname at Manassas) defeated three Union armies in five battles in the Shenandoah Valley and then was able to join Robert E. Lee in attacking McClellan, who fell back and ultimately quit the Peninsula.

## The Confederacy Weakens

After victory at Second Manassas at the end of August 1862, the Confederate army advanced on Maryland but was stalemated at the battle of Antietam on September 17th. This gave President Lincoln an occasion to change Union war goals with the Emancipation Proclamation. The Union army advanced into Virginia but foolishly attacked entrenched Confederates overlooking Fredericksburg and was repulsed with huge losses on December 13, 1862.

In May 1863, Gen. Robert E. Lee won his greatest victory at Chancellorsville, but it cost him the invaluable "Stonewall" Jackson who was mortally wounded during the battle. Emboldened, Lee invaded Pennsylvania, but was defeated after three days of fighting (July 1–3) at Gettysburg. It was the last Confederate offensive.

During 1863 the southern economy deteriorated. A food riot in Richmond by angry, hungry women shocked southern opinion. The Union blockade obstructed the export of cotton, which prevented the Confederacy from obtaining loans and caused its currency to become inflated and eventually worthless. Necessities were acquired, if at all, through barter. Moreover, 38,000 Virginia slaves escaped to Union armies in 1863, further dislocating the economy.

## African American Perspectives

Booker T. Washington, who was a young Virginia slave during the war, recalled that "Even the most ignorant members of my race on the remote plantations felt in their hearts that the freedom of the slaves would be the one great result of the War if the northern armies conquered." A slave preparing dinner while the battle of First Manassas raged, shouted "Ride on, Massa Jesus" each time the cannons fired.

Slaves did not rise up in rebellion as many whites feared, but neither did they simply await emancipation. When opportunity presented itself—generally the proximity of Union troops—they acted. On the very day Virginia seceded, several escaped slaves were allowed into Union-held Fort Monroe. As word spread, the trickle of refugees became a flood, forcing northern officials to apply the term contraband—captured enemy property—to people who were not yet formally free but clearly would not again be slaves.

The tens of thousands of Virginia slaves or contrabands who escaped to Union lines had no means of support and became wards of the federal government. The men became teamsters or ditch or grave diggers for the U.S. Army, while the women served as nurses, laundresses, scouts, or even spies.

In 1863, the U.S. Army began recruiting African Americans. Nine United States Colored Troop (USCT) regiments were formed during 1863–64 in parts of occupied Virginia. The 1st Cavalry fought at Bermuda Hundred and Petersburg and the 2nd Cavalry at Drewry's Bluff and Chaffin's Farm. The 36th and 38th infantry regiments saw action at the Wilderness and in the siege of Petersburg, producing six Medal of Honor recipients.

Other African Virginians served in units organized in the North, such as the 55th Massachusetts, which was 11 percent Virginian. Marie Lewis, a black woman, even disguised herself as a man to serve in the 8th New York Cavalry.

Despite the earlier record of service by black Virginians in 1776 and 1812, Confederates made little effort to enlist them in the cause, probably because slavery was at the heart of the matter. A few served nonetheless. Many Confederate officers had body servants, some of whom enlisted in the army or navy, although usually they were unarmed. Of nearly 29,000 Confederates who surrendered at Appomattox, only 30 were black. By contrast, 5,723 black Virginians were recruited in the state as Union soldiers, and many others enlisted in northern states.

## Women and the Home Front

"The women were, by all odds, far worse rebels than the men," wrote an observer during the Peninsula campaign. Many sewed uniforms, flags, tents, and bandages. Others became nurses. A few were hospital matrons like the revered Annie E. Johns of Danville. Belle Boyd from the Shenandoah Valley was known as the Rebel Spy. Nancy Hart was a scout for Stonewall Jackson. Elizabeth Van Lew spied for the Union and placed a female servant, Mary Elizabeth Bowser, at the White House of the Confederacy. Women assumed control of farms and plantations in the absence of men. In white families without slaves, women ran farms with just the help of children and the aged. Those with slaves often saw them run away as the Union army approached. The home front and the war front were one. Fear of marauding soldiers compounded conditions of real hunger.

Cities grew in size because of the attraction of jobs and, later, food. Richmond increased from about 40,000 in 1860 to perhaps 100,000 in 1863. Women became government clerks or factory workers for the first time. Forty of them died in an explosion at a Richmond ammunition factory.

## Fall of Richmond

In March 1864, Lincoln gave command of Army of the Potomac to Ulysses S. Grant, who had won western victories at Fort Donelson, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. He decided that the southern army, not Richmond, was the target. He determined to remain almost perpetually engaged in combat with Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which Grant knew could not replace its losses. Lee parried Grant's assaults at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania and inflicted a heavy defeat on him at Cold Harbor. But the northern army advanced and laid siege to Richmond and Petersburg. In the meantime, Confederate General Jubal Early was defeated in the Shenandoah Valley by Philip Sheridan, who then devastated the Valley so that it could never again feed the armies defending Richmond.

The Confederates defending Petersburg and Richmond grew weaker as provisions dwindled and desertions increased. Union forces were continually strengthened from their supply base at City Point, briefly one of the world's busiest ports. The Union army kept moving westward, trying

to stretch Lee's defenses to the breaking point. The break occurred at Five Forks in Dinwiddie County on April 1, 1865. General Lee sent word to President Jefferson Davis that the army must forsake Petersburg and Richmond to avoid entrapment. Union forces entered burning Richmond on April 3.

## Surrender at Appomattox

After evacuating his siege lines, Lee hoped to join with a Confederate army under Virginian Joseph Johnston moving up from North Carolina. But, as Lee's men stopped to forage for food, Union general Philip Sheridan slipped around them and blocked their path westward. Almost surrounded by an overwhelming force, Lee surrendered at Appomattox on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865.

The troops who surrendered were the lucky ones. Some 20,000 to 30,000 Virginia soldiers lost their lives during the war. More than half a million people on both sides had been killed, wounded, or captured in Virginia. Property in slaves was swept away without compensation. Virginians were impoverished, and not for 120 years would personal income equal the national average. In that highly religious age, despair compounded defeat with the realization that southerners either had never had God's favor, or had lost it and were being chastened for some as yet unknown purpose.