



“This Bastard New
Virginia”: Slavery, West
Virginia Exceptionalism,
and the Secession Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Located in the northern panhandle, between Pennsylvania and Ohio, the town of Wellsburg in the 1850s was a center of hostility toward eastern Virginia. The Herald's correspondent offered a starkly different interpretation of slaveholding, power, politics, and about the structure of the political system. Much of this resentment manifested itself during the constitutional crisis of 1850-1851, when a state constitutional convention deadlocked over power sharing between nonslaveholders and slaveholders. Soon after convening, the convention remained stalemated over legislative apportionment, with competing "white basis" (which would apportion entirely on white population) and "mixed basis" (which would retain the traditional practice of weighting representation based on slaveholding). The constitutional crisis of 1850-1851 yielded a compromise in which the lower house was apportioned by white basis and the upper house by mixed basis, but a deep-seated division among Virginians remained.

ARTICLE

In March 1858, occasioned by the dedication of a new monument to George Washington in Richmond, the *Wellsburg Herald* complained to its readers in western Virginia about the “insufferable insolence” of the “high toned hospitality of the Eastern Virginians.” One of the speakers at the dedication was Tidewater Virginian Muscoe Russell Hunter Garnett, a member of Congress and nephew of Southern rights Democratic Senator Robert M. T. Hunter. In 1850, Garnett had published a pro-secession tract, *The Union, Past and Future: How It Works and How to Save It*, and during the decade before the Civil War he remained an inveterate supporter of South Carolina-style radicalism. During the celebration honoring Washington, Garnett offered a toast. Just as Virginia had resisted the aggression of England during the Revolution, he said, the Old Dominion should now oppose encroachments by the North. No state except for Virginia, no region except the South, could claim Washington’s mantle. “The South first, the South last,” Garnett concluded, “and the South at all times.”¹

Located in the northern panhandle, between Pennsylvania and Ohio, the town of Wellsburg in the 1850s was a center of hostility toward eastern Virginia. The *Herald’s* correspondent offered a starkly different interpretation of slaveholding, power, politics, and about the structure of the political system. Much of this resentment manifested itself during the constitutional crisis of 1850-1851, when a state constitutional convention deadlocked over power sharing between nonslaveholders and slaveholders. Soon after convening, the convention remained stalemated over legislative apportionment, with competing “white basis” (which would apportion entirely on white population) and “mixed basis” (which would retain the traditional practice of weighting representation based on slaveholding). The constitutional crisis of 1850-1851 yielded a compromise in which the lower house was apportioned by white basis and the upper house by mixed basis, but a deep-seated division among Virginians remained. The *Wellsburg Herald* expressed this resentment and often documented easterners’ slaveholding arrogance. Despite an obsession with a culture of honor, easterners

had violated their own exalted political and civic values. This was, the reporter wrote, a “humiliating spectacle—Virginia had invited men from all parts of the Union to be present on a great national occasion.” Those “strangers and guests” who listened to Garnett’s speech left Virginia profoundly insulted because he had diminished the national identification of George Washington. Such was “the repudiation which the ‘fire-eating’ disunionism gave to the old fashioned hospitality of the old Dominion.”²

The *Wellsburg Herald* provides one of the better examples of an emerging northwest Virginia mentality—and what became a West Virginia exceptionalism. Purchasing the newspaper at the age of twenty-three, editor John G. Jacobs was openly contemptuous of eastern Virginians’ hatred of anti-slavery politicians, including those in the new Republican Party. The *Wellsburg Herald* was “under no obligation to any party,” disinclined “to ask for favors from anyone,” and indifferent toward those accusing it of abolitionism. Jacobs believed that it was absurd for every Virginia magistrate, “every cross-roads Postmaster,” to become a “vigilance committee” to judge what was incendiary.³ But the *Herald’s* commentary suggested something further—that there were momentous changes occurring in late antebellum Virginia. On one level, the same narrative of sectional conflict leading to secession and Civil War was playing out in Virginia, the South’s most populous state and home to the largest number of slaves in the Union. Eventually, in April 1861, after South Carolina’s assault on Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s organization of an invasion force, Virginians would secede and join the Confederacy.

On another level, however, this narrative becomes more complicated. In the late antebellum years an active struggle was waged in the commonwealth for the meaning of the republic, a struggle that centered on the role and appropriate power of slaveholders and slavery. To some extent, this went far beyond the intrastate sectionalism existing in most of the states of the Union in the Civil War Era. Uniquely, Virginia became the only state in American history to implode and to break apart through internal secession. That important phenomenon requires some explanation because it tells us much about the complicated dynamic at work in

sectional politics and suggests a far more complicated portrait than most historians are willing to admit.

Many years ago, Richard O. Curry dispelled the notion that West Virginia achieved statehood through a simple process.⁴ Revising work by Charles Henry Ambler that portrayed the disintegration of Virginia as resulting from sectional differences, Curry showed how the formation of West Virginia arose from complex roots. Remarkably, little work on the topic has appeared since Curry's study, despite an increase in recent scholarship about the border South. Curry showed how most of the present state of West Virginia was probably pro-secession and pro-Confederate, and how the creation of the new state resulted from a Unionist movement centered in northwestern Virginia. There, by the late 1850s, a Republican party managed to exist, despite mob intimidation and in some instances vigilante violence. Although most Southern states kept the Republicans off the ballot, Virginia saw pockets of Republicanism in existence, and Republicans provided a powerful critique of the political status quo.

During the 1850s, West Virginia exceptionalism emerged and blossomed as a social and political phenomenon. Economic expansion, population growth, the spread of a new transportation system, and the rise of a new market-based economic system brought not just wealth and prosperity. These changes also aggravated differences and defined political allegiances of the era, and, ironically, exasperated intrastate sectionalism. Despite the predictions of many, economic growth, the spread of railroads, and the extension of the market system fanned conflict between eastern and western Virginians. Nonslaveholders became increasingly alienated from the state's prevailing slaveholding culture. Differences between easterners and westerners often manifested themselves politically and exacerbated what one eastern newspaper in the 1850s called an "illiberal prejudice" that set apart the "different parts of the same State in ungenerous and hostile antagonism." These tensions, themselves engendered by economic boom and expansion, fueled sectional and geographical conflicts, with the Northwest becoming the political epicenter of western

exceptionalism—and resistance to the dominance of the eastern slaveocracy.

In the northern panhandle, disenchantment became so acute that many residents contemplated secession from Virginia. In late April 1853, residents called a meeting to discuss becoming part of Pennsylvania. Three years later, in 1856, panhandle secessionists attracted the attention of the *Richmond Enquirer*, which concluded that there was “no desire” on the part of that region’s residents to secede; those favoring these extreme measures numbered among the “comparatively few.” But the *Enquirer* was a long way from Brooke, Hancock, and Ohio Counties—worlds apart, in fact. Northwestern sentiment could not have differed more. According to Brooke County’s *Wellsburg Herald*, these counties had become “reduced to the condition of a mere tributary province, and our claims and petitions have alike been treated with contumely, neglect and contempt.”⁵

The Northwest’s alienation found political expression in antislavery sentiment, which was fueled by sectional differences and the political repression of western whites. The *Herald* opposed Virginia’s legal and political protections for slavery; it was the “greatest folly and foolishness” to remain committed to an institution that the political majority possessed a “perfect right” to repudiate. “We have been denominated traitors ourselves,” the *Herald* continued, “because we do not see fit to throw up our hate and cry Hosanna to the God of Niggerdom.”⁶ The *Herald*’s antislavery sentiments were often anti-black; western whites wanted to exclude not only slavery but also black people from competition with free white labor. The basic issue, according to the *Herald* in April 1859, was a lack of political equality between white men. Any “white man, with a proper respect for his color, and appreciation of his rights as a freeman” realized that Virginia’s political system disadvantaged westerners. The lack of proper representation and ad valorem taxation (which would tax slaves according to their value) both unduly benefited slaveholders and placed nonslaveholding westerners in an inferior position. Acknowledging this did not “involve abolitionism or free soilism, or any other ism, deemed

in any quarter disreputable, but is simply the assertion of manly equality of the citizens of a sovereign State."⁷ The *Herald's* hatred for slavery reflected its disdain for black people, and northwestern Virginia's antislavery vision was nearly as exclusionist as eastern Virginia's advocacy of the expulsion of free blacks. The *Herald* believed that slavery's westward expansion debased white society and threatened the economic and moral health of *herrenvolk* democracy.

Northwestern Virginia sentiment, explained the *Herald*, was antislavery rather than abolitionist; nonslaveholders wanted a "denial of legislative encouragement" resulting in a "slow abolition over the course of time," with "mild effects" and "no regrets."⁸ As one Virginia Republican explained, Southern Republicans opposed "ultra pro-slaveryites" but did not favor abolition. Virginia Republicans favored restricting slavery's western expansion, which they believed was "indubitably an error in politics." At the same time, they regarded slavery extension "as indifferently right or wrong, in morals." Limiting slaveholders' political ascendancy became the Virginia Republicans' primary message, and they attached greater importance to the "liberties of the white man than to the slavery of the black." Along with political underrepresentation and a lack of support for western internal improvements, the 1851 constitution had bequeathed an inequitable tax system, which was becoming a festering grievance.

In early 1860, when the legislature considered raising taxes to finance the military mobilization, northwesterners objected to a tax on wool—a product raised mostly in western Virginia—while eastern corn, tobacco, and wheat remained untaxed. This reflected a larger tax policy that exempted slaves under age twelve and only nominally taxed other slaves, while taxing land and livestock according to their full value. Tax policy, complained the *Wellsburg Herald*, sought to "encourage and foster slavery." Why should wool growers be "singled out as a special subject of taxation"? Should northwestern Virginians serve as "bearers of wood and drawers of waters for your worse than Egyptian task-masters"?⁹ When Lee County's David Miller proposed a resolution in January 1860 equalizing taxation,

a northwesterner concluded that there was “no hope . . . that this just and proper resolution, will receive any favor at the hands of this Democratic legislature.” Slave property was “privileged, and a pet project with the Democracy.” “Oh, what a glorious privilege have the white laboring men of the Northwest, of being Democrats!” Miller’s resolution later received only two votes in its favor.¹⁰

Despite deep suspicion of the Republican party in eastern Virginia, there was a small but persistent Republican presence in northwestern Virginia. By 1860, Virginia Republicans had emerged as a viable party, with voters, candidates, and a partisan press. When the general assembly considered legislation in early 1860 to mobilize the commonwealth militarily, Republican George Porter objected. Representing Brooke and Hancock Counties in the House of Delegates, Porter declared that the panhandle would heartily defend the Union. He suggested, moreover, that his constituents would take up arms against eastern Virginians should they seek to secede. When asked if he subscribed to the idea that “Virginia—may she always be right, but Virginia, right or wrong,” Porter responded: “The people, I repeat, will go with Virginia when she is right; but when she is wrong, will probably beg leave to differ from her.” Privately, Porter wrote a supporter that he intended to “vote hereafter as heretofore regardless of majorities.”¹¹

Republicans had established themselves in northwestern Virginia during the late 1850s, even while they faced repressive measures against them. Republicans occasionally poked up their heads “like so many frogs in the spring,” the *Wellsburg Herald* explained, appearing “very timidly, as though in bashful apprehension lest some unmannerly fire-eater should shy a stone at their whistles.” In northwestern Virginia, one could become a Republican “without the least fear of decapitation.” Alfred Caldwell, former mayor of Wheeling, was elected to the state senate in 1859 but was an active Republican by 1860. Serving as a member of the Republican National Committee in 1860, Caldwell would eventually become what one contemporary called one of “the most sagacious and resolute Republicans in the Northwest.” While in the legislature, Caldwell was ostracized, left to smoke his cigars alone, and pay his

own bills at the bar. Much of the sentiment against Caldwell was inspired by the Democratic *Wheeling Union*, which heaped a "long continued and indecent abuse" upon him for being an abolitionist, and did so with a "grovelling spirit of hatred." Nonetheless, Caldwell was sent by overwhelming majority to Richmond, said the *Wellsburg Herald*, "to represent the peculiar sentiments of the Panhandle in regard to slavery, not to be the toast of urbanity." Virginia legislators could "snub him all they like but should not insult his constituents." The "peddler-lynching, school-mam expelling, parson-whipping editors and asses of Old Virginia" should leave him alone.¹²

The Republican press played an important role in the party's existence and expansion. The Northwest's largest city, Wheeling, housed Virginia's most important Republican newspaper, the *Daily Intelligencer*, edited by Alexander W. Campbell after 1856. Dismissed by an opposing newspaper as a "malignant abolitionist concern," the *Intelligencer*, along with the weekly *Wellsburg Herald*, gradually moved into Republican ranks. Growing West Virginia exceptionalism fed into the election of 1860. Northwesterners formed Republican glee clubs and created "wide awake" militia companies that mimicked similar groups in the North. In September 1860 the Wide Awakes organized a parade in Wheeling, and their arrival was cheered by about five hundred Republicans. Republican rallies during the same month and subsequently were held in Wellsburg, in Brooke County, and New Cumberland, in Hancock County.¹³

Northwestern Republicans faced the constant threat of harassment, mob violence, and ostracism. It was said that Virginia Republicans usually wrote out their wills before voting. In the winter of 1860, Republicans, now prominent in the northwestern counties, began to organize at the grass roots. But the political context was complicated: western Virginians remained solidly Jacksonian and Democratic, and in the presidential election of 1860 the Northwest voted a majority for Southern rights Democrat John C. Breckinridge. The election of 1860 and the secession convention that followed it crystallized differences between eastern and western Virginia. The increasing stridency of delegates from Northwest

Virginia provided another dimension to the Unionist/secessionist debate. Because eastern Virginians treated westerners as their “vassals,” said the *Intelligencer* in late 1860, they had become a “separate people.” There was now no true affinity between East and West, and the most important distinguishing characteristic was slavery. The *Intelligencer* predicted the division of the state as a likely outcome. In January 1861, warning that “Jacobins” would seek to foist secession and revolution on impassive Virginians, the *Herald* urged westerners to realize that their interests lay outside of the slaveholding East. Should an “illegal or irresponsible” convention secede, westerners should be prepared to separate and form a new state.¹⁴ Westerners had endured political and social inequality. Inequitable representation had deprived them of power; a constitutional structure favoring slaveholders required them to pay an “unequal share” of taxes. Counties west of the Blue Ridge had received “but little if anything” in support for internal improvements because easterners had “monopolized” those funds. These were evils “of which Western Virginia may complain against the East, or of which the South complains against the North.” How would this situation improve with secession, if Virginia became the “tail-end of a Cotton Confederacy”? This striking combination of Unionism and northwestern exceptionalism was embodied in a resolution that James Burley of Marshall County introduced on March 23. It announced that there was “no reason for departing from the faith of our fathers,” but suggested that if a “right of revolution” could be exercised against the federal government, it might also be used “by a portion of the citizens of a State against their State government.”¹⁵

In the northern panhandle’s Hancock County, Republicans emerged during the presidential election of 1860. There, in September, they erected a tall pole on top of an old Indian mound, nailing the names of Lincoln and his vice-presidential nominee, Hamilton Hamlin, to the masthead. After various addresses, the crowd of one thousand people—“a considerable portion of whom were ladies”—adjourned for a fireworks display. Many of those who attended came convinced that Republicans were abolitionists, but they left “expressing their surprise that they had so long

misunderstood the principles advocated, and finding that, instead of a party seeking to intermeddle with slavery as established in the States, the Republican [party] was strictly a State's rights party, believing to its fullest extent in State sovereignty, and only opposed to the spread of slavery into Territories now free." The election of Lincoln, they now believed, had become the "surest way of carrying out the views they had long entertained in regard to slavery and of settling forever that vexed question which has so long disturbed the harmony of this Union."

For Virginia Republicans, Lincoln's election in November 1860 at least partly repudiated eastern slaveholders' political domination. For too long, slaveholders had run political affairs at the expense of ordinary whites, especially westerners. "The domestic policy of Virginia has been shaped for many years back to foster the slave interest at the expense of all others," declared the *Wellsburg Herald*, "and it has become necessary for the development of Western Virginia that a different system should prevail." Lincoln's election would "counteract the slave-holding oligarchy." Western Virginians possessed a stake in Lincoln's free-soil, antislavery policy, for free territories developed more rapidly than slave territories. "As the whole question is pretty much one of money, it is obviously to the interests of citizens of Virginia, many of whom are peculiarly interested in the territories, that they should be filled up as rapidly as possible." Republicans were the best protectors of white men, the *Herald* concluded.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, an emerging West Virginia exceptionalism dominated the dialogue about the sectional crisis of 1860-1861. After Lincoln's election, there were calls for a state convention to enact a secession ordinance, calls that came mostly from eastern Virginians. The Northwest remained an outpost of exceptionalism. The lesson that the *Herald* derived from the election was that, though Republicans attracted only slightly more than two thousand votes in Virginia, a "nucleus" existed "around which the white man's party of the State is to build, and, with ordinary prudence on their own party and expected imprudence on the part of their opponents, it will not

be long until it represents a majority of citizens of the State.” It was only a “matter of time” before Republicans expanded their position.¹⁷

In December 1860, the *Herald* warned of the “probability” that disunion would lead to “dismemberment of Virginia.”¹⁸ “The peril is at our own doors,” the newspaper noted on another occasion, with the four northern panhandle counties of Hancock, Brooke, Ohio, and Marshall wedged in between Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Eastern Virginians’ secession would create a “misshapen wedge of slave territory thrust up between two sections of free soil.” The *Herald* believed that the Wheeling area preferred separating from Virginia and either forming a new state or joining with Pennsylvania; it was “impossible” that that city would remain loyal to a southern Confederacy. “Her interests and the affections of her people are yearly becoming more indented [sic] with those of the people of the West and North,” and, “in the same proportion as she grows populous and wealthy, will she become independent of Virginia influences and disposed to avail herself of her own power and influence.” Remaining in Virginia under a Confederacy would mean occupying a “degrading, humiliating position.” Westerners possessed interests that were “dearer to us than the interests of South Carolina, or even those of Eastern Virginia. Our interests are in the present Union, even if theirs be out of it.” There was now a “chronic discontent” in western Virginia with the political status, and especially the domination of the eastern slaveocracy. “That discontent has prevailed for years, and, instead of being meliorated by time, the tendency is, to become more embittered, as the white population increases and the black diminishes.”

“Jacobins” threatened to foist secession and political revolution on a largely impassive population, warned the *Wellsburg Herald* in January 1861. It urged western Virginia “and all of the counties east of the said Ridge, whose interests are identified with Maryland, the cities of Baltimore, Washington, and Alexandria” to denounce “any illegal or irresponsible convention or conference” and to “take such steps as may be necessary . . . for the purpose of adopting proper measures for forming a new State in the Union.” Westerners were connected by “the strong cords of their affection to the Constitution

and the Union; and, feeling secure under its broad folds, will forever defy any such underground engines and machinery to 'drag' our proud vessel of State from its moorings." If preserving the Union required it, western Virginians should be prepared to "secede from Virginia the moment that Virginia shall withdraw from the Union, believing that our interests of every kind, and that liberty, which is above everything else, to be more secure in the Union than outside of it."¹⁹

Popular sentiment seemed to follow the *Herald's* characterization of the crisis. Wellsburg and Brooke County citizens assembled on January 8, 1861, to draw up resolutions denouncing the right of secession. No cause of any kind, "short of such unendurable oppression," justified revolution and disunion, declared the resolutions. The Union remained of such "vital importance" that it should not be undermined. The "South Carolina school of politicians" had for the past three decades advocated "rash" actions, but western Virginians remained "unalterably devoted" to the Union. Assembling a convention would therefore be "highly injudicious," and the Brooke residents felt no duty to be bound by its decisions. Their devotion to the Union was so strong that "we will rally to its support when threatened by enemies without or traitors within."²⁰



Waitman T. Willey Courtesy of the West Virginia History and Regional Collection West Virginia Libraries

On March 16, an explosive issue emerged when Waitman T. Willey rose to address the Richmond secession convention. Virginia's constitution stipulated that all slaves under the age of twelve were exempt from taxation as property, while adult slaves could be taxed no more than three hundred dollars in value. Willey offered resolutions stating that all property should be "equal and uniform

throughout the Commonwealth, and that all property should be taxed in proportion to its value." The ad valorem issue had been festering, and appeared prominently when the 1860 General Assembly appropriated funds to finance a military mobilization. There were loud objections by western legislators, and the press continued to complain. The legislature had "appropriated hundreds of thousands for Armories and for arms," said the *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, "and for all the tom foolery of secession schemes." Westerners, the *Intelligencer* complained, were required to pay for this through an inequitable taxation system. Earlier in the convention, on February 25, Alpheus F. Haymond of Fairmont had raised the ad valorem issue, when he proposed an amendment to the state constitution making taxation of slave property the same as other property. On March 2, Franklin P. Turner of Jackson County proposed resolutions calling for the elimination of the tax exemption on slave property, and, on March 7, William G. Brown of Preston County proposed the organization of a special committee of finance to examine taxation issues.²¹

Nonetheless, Willey's resolutions had an immediate appeal for northwestern Virginians eager to draw connections between the secessionist claim for equality in the Union and intrastate inequities. The impact of Willey's resolutions—which came as secessionists' fortunes had soured in the convention generally—had the effect of a "ten inch bomb," according to the *Intelligencer*. Easterners were drawn into a dialogue about slavery, power, and sectionalism that closely resembled the debate during the constitutional convention in the spring of 1851. Willey himself privately noted that "nearly all" Valley and Southwest delegates were unhappy with his resolutions.

Although first raised in late February, slave taxation dominated debate from March 16 to April 11, when it was referred to a special committee appointed to consider the matter and to report to the convention. Further debate followed the report of that committee on April 19—two days after the convention had enacted an ordinance of secession—and on April 26, the convention adopted a constitutional change incorporating ad valorem taxation on slaves "without exemption." The debate about taxation illustrated fundamental

sectional differences, and the secession ordinance, adopted on April 17, 1861, also marked the coming of age of West Virginia exceptionalism. “One thing is certain,” said the *Wellsburg Herald*: Virginia’s “recent troubles” had “awakened a spirit of independence in Western Virginia that did not previously exist; and such men when they return and commence mingling with their fellow citizens at home, will speedily notice the change.” Northwesterners believed that they were “as good a[s] those reared east of the ridge; and did not consider it necessary that their delegates should commence all their speeches with an apology, especially since they represent the larger half of the white people of the State.”²²

After the Richmond convention passed an ordinance of secession on April 17, the breach between east and west became profound. Of forty-seven delegates from western Virginia at the convention, thirty-two voted against secession, eleven voted for it, and four did not vote. Although two of those voting against the ordinance and two not voting later signed the secession ordinance, two thirds of the western delegates remained unconditional Unionists.²³ John S. Burdett, delegate from northwestern Taylor County, left for home almost immediately. Greeted by friends with cheers on the following day, April 18, he declared that it was a “better time for tears.” On April 19, two days after the adoption of the secession ordinance, John Carlile and several other northwestern delegates, fearing for their lives, fled Richmond, stopping in Washington on the way to tell Lincoln of Virginia’s secession. On April 20, the remainder of the northwestern delegation collectively decided to leave Richmond; the next day, Governor Letcher provided them with safe-conduct passes, and fourteen of the Unionists departed the city. Across the northwestern counties that included the northern panhandle, the Ohio River valley, and the counties through which passed the western extension of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, Unionists organized themselves during the spring of 1861, spearheading political resistance to the new Confederacy. The twenty-two delegates who refused to sign the secession ordinance were expelled from the convention; by the time that occurred, they had already left Richmond to organize their own convention at Wheeling in May and

June 1861 toward the organization of a Union government, and in 1863, the formation of the new state of West Virginia.²⁴

While much of the rest of the state became Confederate, northwestern Virginians moved toward the establishment of a Union identity. There were secessionists across the Northwest, and, as Richard Curry and others have demonstrated, the view of a monolithic Unionism is misleading.²⁵ On April 29, 1861, a large group gathered in Wellsburg and adopted resolutions opposing secession and affirming their loyalty to the Union. Denouncing the legislature and Governor John Letcher, the meeting laid out a rationale for a western exceptionalism. There was, the resolution asserted, a “peculiar situation” in northwestern Virginia, “separated as it is by natural barriers from the rest of the State, [which] precludes all hope of timely succor in the hour of danger from other portions of the States, and demands that we should look to and provide for our own safety in the fearful emergency in which we now have ourselves placed by the action of our State authorities, who have disregarded the great fundamental principle upon which our beautiful system of Government is based”—that is, that power was derived from the consent of the governed. There were numerous examples of a spirit of rebellion in eastern Virginia: the recent obstruction of the Elizabeth River at its mouth in order to prevent the entrance of federal warships; the taking over by Virginia officials of federal customs houses in Richmond and Norfolk; the bringing down of the American flag on federal property and replacing it with “a bunting, the emblem of rebellion,” and the capture of the federal armory in Harpers Ferry. All of these actions added up to the inauguration of a “war without consulting those in whose name they profess to act.” Brooke County citizens were “unalterably opposed” to Virginia’s secession ordinance, and they remained loyal only to those laws as adopted under the United States constitution. The community was now “thoroughly aroused,” said the *Herald*, “wrought up, we verily believe, to the point of bloodshed in defence of the dearest rights of an American freeman. . . . The time for words has passed, and all the argument now in vogue is the roll of the

drum and the shrill music of the fife, summoning the citizen-soldier to ‘organize and arm’ under the flag of the Union.”²⁶

At this point, western exceptionalists were not necessarily calling for separation from Virginia, the actions of which they recognized as radical, even revolutionary. But their more important realization was how alienated they had become from slaveholding political culture. Situated in close proximity to federal military forces, northwest Virginia saw that it was “folly” to support the Confederate cause. In addition, it seemed “to be pretty generally understood that, whatever else they may do, Western Virginia will never fight the battles of the Southern Confederacy.” There was a “vague but very decided dissatisfaction” with the actions of the Richmond secession convention and the legislature, said the *Herald*, along with “a very positive and decided disposition to submit no longer to Eastern Virginia domination.” Despite a “strong expression” for dividing the state, the *Herald* doubted its feasibility. Most northwesterners favored combining with federal military forces and punishing the “traitorous demagogues throughout the State, West as well as East, who have brought the troubles upon us.” Further resolutions sought to “crush out forever the heresy of secession and its kindred absurdities.”²⁷

Notably, not all western Virginians subscribed to this view of the Union, and, outside of the Northwest, opinions were decidedly more mixed. In May 1861, the *Clarksburg Register* expressed its “profound mortification” about “a few” citizens of northwest Virginia “who forget the wisdom, patriotism and prowess of our ancestral dead—the exalted sense of honor which the memory of these inspires—the security, strength, greatness and influence which her integrity affords—and who would cut off a petty fragment from the land of our fathers, and attach it to that of our most inveterate enemies—would form from a few of the northwestern counties of Virginia a fragmentary bastard corner of Pennsylvania or Ohio, or else remain alone, a petty, feeble, helpless, renegade community, on the border of two great Confederacies, despised by that which it deserted in the hour of peril, and condemned by that to which it should attach itself for protection.”²⁸

By summer 1861, the disintegration of Virginia was well underway. On May 23, the commonwealth's voters overwhelmingly endorsed a statewide referendum on secession. Yet in northwestern Virginia, voters rejected the measure by a margin of two to one. The *Herald* had urged voters to reject the secession referendum of May 23, "in the hope that we may not be involved in the ruin to be occasioned by its adoption, and with the view to demonstrate the position of the West on the question of secession." Departing the Union was "utterly ruinous to all the material interests of our section" in view of the "geographical, social, commercial and industrial interests of North Western Virginia." The course of action pursued by the "ruling power in the State" had been "utterly subversive and destructive of our interests."²⁹ Why should western Virginians permit themselves "to be dragged into the rebellion inaugurated by ambitious and heartless men, who have banded themselves together to destroy a government formed for you by your patriot fathers, and which has secured to you all the liberties."

The *Herald* offered an extended denunciation of the eastern slaveocracy. For three-quarters of a century, the Union had sheltered Virginians "in sunshine and in storm," made them the "admiration of the civilised world," and conferred a designation "more honored, more respected and revered than that of King or Potentate—the title of American citizen." Would westerners "passively surrender" the republic, and "submit to be used by the conspirators engaged in this effort to enslave you, as their instruments by which your enslavement is to be effected"? In order to be free, free men "must prove themselves worthy to be free, and must themselves first strike the blow." Secession was a "deed of darkness, which had to be performed in secret conclave, by the reckless spirits who accomplished it, in contempt of their people, their masters under our form of government, but who the leaders in this work of destruction have determined to enslave." Secessionists and eastern slaveocrats would keep "a distance from danger" and fill "lucrative offices and secure the rich appointments which appertain to the new order of things." They would "luxuriate on two or three or four hundred dollars per month, with horses, and servants, and rations to match,

while the Union-loving population will be called upon, for the honor of Virginia and two shillings per day, to do the fighting and endure the hardships of war.” They would say: “We are all Virginians,” and “the State must be sustained, and, right or wrong, we must all fight for Virginia, etc.” But in this course of self-destruction, the fight was for the “tyrannical rule of the Richmond convention,” and westerners should reject a “tyranny worse many times than that from which the war of ‘76 delivered us.” Reject the “haughty arrogance and wicked machinations of would-be Eastern despots,” the *Herald* urged. “Are we submissionists, craven cowards, who will yield to daring ambition the rich legacy of Freedom which we have inherited from our fathers, or are we men who know our rights, and, knowing, dare maintain them?” The “cornerstone” of the southern Confederacy was “slavery,” and its “superstructure” was the principle that “few must rule, and the capstone of which is imperial sway, sustained by military power.” There was no greater despotism than the “will of man unrestrained by law, no more odious tyranny” than that “established on the basis of human slavery.”³⁰

After a brief convention at Wheeling on May 13, 1861, that awaited the results of the statewide referendum on secession, a second Wheeling convention met for fifteen days in June. It created a “restored” government that would, in 1863, authorize the organization of the new state of West Virginia.³¹ By late May 1861, constitutional separation of western Virginia was matched by military mobilization for the Union. On May 20, Brooke County residents bid farewell to their first military company mustered into service. On a “wet and disagreeable” day, a crowd gathered at the town of New Cumberland to present the soldiers with a flag local women had sewn. One of the women, Sarah Grafton, offered an address. The flag, she said, embodying the “best affections of this mighty people,” represented what was “noble and true in our nation’s history.” Soldiers bearing this flag were protecting that which was “dearer than life to us, our country’s honor and the cause of right.” When the steamboat *Baker* arrived to take away the soliders, the scene became “exciting in the extreme,” with the group sending up cheer after cheer for the Union. “The boys hurrahd

for the volunteers," wrote one observer, while the "ladies waved their adieus, and old, staid men, who had long since regarded such demonstrations as only fitted for the young, threw up their hats and made the valley ring for the Union and the Constitution."³²

A similar scene occurred in Wheeling when local militia left the railroad station on May 28, 1861. Hundreds of pro-Union supporters congregated at the depot to celebrate their departure, and, as their train passed, it was greeted by cheering crowds as militia armed with Minie rifles guarded against secessionist attacks. "Business of all kinds" remained suspended, with "nearly everybody either having gone regularly into camp, or acting as guard to the Railroad or some telegraphic station." At Cameron, in Marshall County, citizens flocked to the passing railroad cars, bringing provisions, pies, cakes, and food in great quantities. According to one account, local residents regarded troops as "deliverers" who had come to "defend them and to scatter the rebels from among them." The entire town of Grafton—which recorded only one secessionist vote—greeted the arriving soldiers, with thirty to forty ladies wearing star-spangled banner aprons. There were, to be sure, remaining areas of secessionist support. Crossing into Marion County, "the cheers and greetings from wayside houses and groups became less frequent, the persons living in that neighborhood being mostly secessionists." In one community, a large pole with an American flag atop it had been replaced by a secession banner that "recently unfurled its slimy folds."³³

By June 1861, there was considerable disagreement about whether to seek immediate dismemberment. Easterners regarded these developments as traitorous. The northwestern moves represented, said the *Richmond Enquirer*, the ambition of the "greater portion of the Panhandle conspirators" who were most concerned with "office of honor or emolument." Unionists should pause before proceeding further. Though they could vote against the ordinance of secession, they should realize that they could not be "true to the Union, of which Lincoln is the head, without being false to the State to which they owe their allegiance." Those "false" to their "own native land" would remain "condemned and execrated by the true

men and women of every land” with a “brand of Cain, and, what is worse, the same mark is visible in his children, from generation to generation.”³⁴

The coalescence and subsequent full flowering of western exceptionalism was, of course, profoundly alarming to eastern Virginians. “Can you forget the protecting care and fostering hand of your own good old Virginia,” asked the *Richmond Enquirer*, “for this bastard New Virginia, the off-spring of such abandoned and worthless wretches as those now skulking from their homes and seeking to sell you to their abolitionist master?” Northwesterners had “erred overmuch in adhering so long to vain hopes of peace and justice from the old Union,” but an opportunity now existed to “retrieve your fault.” “Virginians of the West, the eyes of the world are upon you,” the *Enquirer* declared. “Let your motto be: ‘One Virginia, East and West; we will stand or fall together.’”³⁵

By the onset of the Civil War, the reality was that a large portion of northwestern Virginia had been moved by powerful forces of western exceptionalism. In late May 1861, the *Herald* recounted the record, finding a pattern of eastern domination and tyranny. Contrary to the will of westerners, the “traitors” of eastern Virginia had succeeded in their “long contemplated and deeply laid scheme for dragging Virginia out of the Union.” This was not something that occurred spontaneously but was part of a pattern of anti-democratic behavior. On January 7, 1861, the *Herald* recalled, the governor called for an extra session of the legislature, ostensibly to deal with the transfer of the James River & Kanawha Canal to a French company, but in reality this provided a pretext for the enactment of a bill assembling a state convention. On April 17, by means of “insults, outrages and intimidation,” the convention drove away its Unionist members and then enacted a secession ordinance, contrary to the expressed will of the majority. The state government provided for a referendum on May 23 that was a farce, claimed the *Herald*. It opened polls in military camps, whether in Virginia or not, and provided that soldiers could vote from May 15 to the day of election. It moved quickly and unconstitutionally to seize Harpers Ferry and other federal property before the referendum, while it

enacted an unconstitutional stay law on April 30. On May 11, the governor issued a proclamation banning the sale of flour, grain, pork, beef, bacon, or other provisions to Ohio and Pennsylvania, a device, claimed the *Herald*, that ensured that trade would go to “our particular friends from South Carolina.” There were Unionists east of the Blue Ridge, and they made “desperate stands in detached localities,” but their votes would be suppressed. The vote was conducted in the style of the Second Empire under Louis Napoleon; everyone was permitted to vote provided that they voted in the correct fashion. Where the vote was free, it went against secession; in the northern panhandle, the vote was 6,828 to 431 in favor of remaining in the Union.³⁶

NOTES

This article was previously published in *West Virginia History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2009.

1. *Wellsburg Herald*, May 6, 1859.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Alan Lawrence Golden, “The Secession of Virginia: A Critical Study of Argument” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1990), 179-83; Clement Eaton, *Freedom of Thought in the Old South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1940), 183-88; *Wellsburg Herald*, Feb. 17, Mar. 9, 16, and July 13, 1860; *Wellsburg Herald*, June 1, 1860; Jacobs to Campbell, Jan. 10, 1860, box 1, Archibald W. Campbell Papers, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown, WV (hereafter cited as WVRHC).
4. Richard O. Curry, *A House Divided: A Study of Statehood Politics and the Copperhead Movement in West Virginia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964); Charles Henry Ambler, *Sectionalism in Virginia from 1776 to 1861* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1916).
5. *Cooper’s Clarksburg Register*, Apr. 27, 1853; *Wheeling Argus*, Apr. 11, 1856; *Wellsburg Herald*, Mar. 5, 1858.
6. *Wellsburg Herald*, Sept. 3, 1858.
7. *Ibid.*, Apr. 29, 1859.
8. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1859, and Jan. 13, 1860.
9. *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, Oct. 5, and May 11, 1860.
10. *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, Jan. 25, Feb. 12 and 15, 1860.

11. Ibid., Jan. 21, 1860; Porter to Campbell, Jan. 24, 1860, box 1, Campbell Papers, WVRHC. Eastern Virginian John Coles Rutherford complained about Porter's "atrocious sentiment" in Rutherford Diary, Jan. 12, 1860, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.
12. *Wellsburg Herald*, Apr. 20, 1860; Granville Davisson Hall, *The Rending of Virginia: A History* (Chicago: Mayer & Miller, 1901), 127; *Wellsburg Herald*, Jan. 6, 1860; *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, Feb. 8, 1860.
13. "Our Post Master, Abolitionism, & c.," *Wheeling Union*, clipping in Campbell Papers, WVRHC; *Wellsburg Herald*, Sept. 28, 1860; *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, Sept. 22, 1860.
14. *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, Dec. 25, 1860; *Wellsburg Herald*, Jan. 4, 1861.
15. H. Dering to Willey, Feb. 23, 1861, Waitman T. Willey Papers, box 1, WVRHC; *Wellsburg Herald*, Feb. 15, 1861. See also Clarksburg Guard, quoted in the *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, Mar. 22 and 27, 1861. On Burley's resolutions, see James C. McGregor, *The Disruption of Virginia* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1922), 153-54.
16. *Wellsburg Herald*, Sept. 28, 1860.
17. Ibid., Nov. 16, 1860.
18. Ibid., Dec. 14, 21, and 28, 1860.
19. Ibid., Jan. 4, 1861.
20. Ibid., Jan. 11, 1861.
21. *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention 1*, Mar. 16, 1861, 765-68; *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer*, Feb. 27, 1861; *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention 1*, Mar. 2 and 7, 1861, 317, 442; *Wellsburg Herald*, Mar. 15, 1861; Henry T. Shanks, *The Secession Movement in Virginia, 1847-1861* (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, 1934), 272n199. Remarkably, historians have paid little attention to the Mar.-Apr. 1861 debate about slave taxation. For brief treatments, see Shearer Davis Bowman, "Conditional Unionism and Slavery in Virginia, 1860-1861," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 96 (Jan. 1988): 31-35; McGregor, *Disruption of Virginia*, 154-56; Paul A. Atkins, "Henry A. Wise and the Virginia Secession Convention, Feb. 13-Apr. 17, 1861" (master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1950), 91-94, 96-97; Curry, *A House Divided*, 33-34.
22. *Wellsburg Herald*, Apr. 12, 1861.
23. Charles H. Ambler, *Francis H. Pierpont: Union War Governor and Father of West Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 81-95.
24. John S. Carlile, Cranmer MS. Recollections, WVRHC; Shanks, *Secession Movement*, 208-13; Hall, *Rending of Virginia*, 203-4, 528-30; McGregor, *Disruption of Virginia*, 182-205; Craig Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985,) 250-51; Wayne Stanley Bond, "A Study of the Rhetorical Methods of John S. Carlile in the West Virginia Statehood Movement" (master's thesis, West Virginia University, 1969).

25. Curry, *A House Divided*.
26. *Wellsburg Herald*, May 3, 1861.
27. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1861.
28. *Richmond Enquirer*, May 7, 1861.
29. *Wellsburg Herald*, May 24, 1861.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Curry, *A House Divided*; Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-70* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 10-15; Hamilton James Eckenrode, *The Political History of Virginia during the Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1904), 10-13.
32. *Wellsburg Herald*, May 31, 1861.
33. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1861.
34. *Richmond Enquirer*, May 24, 1861; *Wellsburg Herald*, June 11 and 21, 1861.
35. *Richmond Enquirer*, June 12, 1861.
36. *Wellsburg Herald*, May 31, 1861.