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JOHN LETCHER

by

J. Monroe Wells, Jr.

May 1940

PREFACE

This monograph will present to its reader a biographical study of a man who is little known— John Letcher, Civil War Governor of Virginia. The Civil War is, to date, the most important episode in the history of these United States. From this internal upheaval evolved a great and compact nation. From the opening volley at Sumter to the surrender at Appomattox, Virginia was in a position of importance. It was the main objective of the Federal Government, since the Capitol of the Confederacy was at Richmond. Throughout this turmoil there was a leader and a statesman in the governor's chair. Letcher was a loyal son of Virginia who had made his mark through hard work and industriousness. His career is worthy indeed of recognition. Herein is the justification of this manuscript.

The author gratefully acknowledges the aid of ^{MRS.} ~~Miss~~ Fitzhugh Brauer and of his wife, Evaline.

J. M. W.

INTRODUCTION

Endless volumes have been written on the War Between the States. One has often read of the great military and political leaders of the period, and of the campaigns and battles. There can be little doubt of the important part that the State of Virginia played during these years. Yet there has been little space allotted to the man who, as Governor of Virginia, steered the course that this mighty state followed.

The object of this monograph is to present this man who loved and served his state well. The author has endeavored to paint a true picture of John Letcher by discussing his background, early life, education, political preparatory work, public career, and life after the war.

JOHN LETCHER

John Letcher was born on March 28, 1813, in Rockbridge County in the Shenandoah Valley near Lexington, Virginia. He was of Scotch-Welsh extraction, the son of William Letcher and Elizabeth (Davidson) Letcher. His mother was first cousin to General Sam Houston.¹ Through this ancestry he was endowed with thrift and industry, which produced a man of action and progress. He was literally raised on hard work and had little time for the pursuit of a formal education. He did, however, devote his spare time to reading and learning what he could. When twenty-one years old, he had attained enough preparatory education and had procured money to enter Washington College,² where he acquired the foundation of a classical education. He later attended Randolph Macon College. He soon discovered that he was inclined toward law and left college in 1836 to study in the law office of the Hon. William Taylor in Lexington. After three years, he was licensed

1

Infra, 2.

2

Now known as Washington and Lee University.

to practice and was associated with Taylor and aided and encouraged by Governor James McDowell. "At the bar he rose rapidly; a retentive memory, clear mental powers of analysis, and a habit of observation enabling him to comprehensively grasp the relations of his profession to real life as well as the issues of the day."³

Letcher in 1839 established the Valley Star and acted ably as its editor until 1840. This paper served to advance the cause of education for everyone in that section and to give voice to the principles of Democracy.

Letcher was not the type of man to stand still. He advanced step by step, realizing one ambition after another. In 1840 and 1844 he participated in the Presidential campaigns. Also in 1844, having resumed the office of editor of the Valley Star, he advocated many issues, including the annexation of Texas, at that time a republic, of which his cousin, General Sam Houston,⁴ was President.

In 1847, Letcher, along with many others, signed a letter requesting publication of the Ruffner Address, which had been suggested by the group agitating the division of Virginia.⁵

1848 saw John Letcher serving as Presidential Elector on the

³
R. A. Brock, "John Letcher", Hardesty's Historical and Geographical Encyclopedia, Amherst and Bedford Counties vols., 384.

⁴
Supra, 1.

⁵
Infra, 5.

Democratic ticket. All during this period of his life, he was thrown with the best intellects of the country and winning their approval and admiration.

When a convention was called two years later(1850) to remodel the State Constitution, Letcher was sent to that body ^{by} a large majority, although his district was strongly opposed to the Democratic party. He was elected to Congress as Representative in 1851 and served until 1859. As a member of this body , he expressed his own and his State's views on slavery and states rights. He considered the North's objections to the South's slaves an infringement of their rights as a state. He said that if it came to an issue, forced by the North, the South could exist alone, protected by her native sons, whose ancestors did so much to set up the Union. He defended slavery against remarks that it "blunted the intellectual and moral faculties and hardens the heart and destroys...religious faculties." He was a member of the Committee of Ways and Means, serving "with such distinguished ability and marked devotion to the true interests of the Republic -- examining, especially, with such faithful peculiarity, all appropriations of money, advocating, with such zeal, a wise economy, arraying himself so fearlessly against every species of official

corruption, that the appellation of 'Honest John Letcher' not being sufficient to compass the fidelity and success of his services, he was, therefore, familiarly denominated the 'Watchdog of the United States Treasury.'⁷"

The most exciting and perhaps the bitterest election that had been held in Virginia was the one in 1859, in which Letcher became Governor, defeating W. L. Graggin. Richmond was carried by the Whigs with a majority of four or five hundred. The State, however, gave a 5,569 majority to the Democrats. One unusual feature of this campaign was a series of debates. "The two candidates sat on the hustings before huge crowds, and debated slavery, secession, squatter sovereignty, Cuba, Buchanan, and other questions, to the entertainment, edification, and delight⁸ of shouting multitudes."

An interesting pamphlet was published at this time, on the title page of which appeared ---'To the People of Virginia! John Letcher and His Antecedents. Read and Circulate.' This pamphlet is exemplary of what can be done in politics. This was, of course, published by his opponents. It points out incidents from Letcher's past life which prove, according to them, that he is unfit for

⁷
Samuel Rutherford Houston, Brief Biographical Accounts of Many Members of the Houston Family, 60.

⁸
William Henry Tappey Squires, Through Centuries Three, 466.

the high office of Governor. And very convincing it is, too; i. e., if one holds the opinion that a statement made in a man's early years must necessarily continue to be his opinion the remainder of his life. This pamphlet reproduces correspondence and excerpts from speeches and interpolates them to his enemies advantage. The part played by Letcher in the Ruffner Address is discussed at great length and their interpretation of his connection with it is used as the main basis for the argument presented. In 1847 Henry Ruffner made a speech, as did Letcher and others, before the Franklin Society concerning the discussion of the question of the division of Virginia. Ruffner was requested to publish it for circulation. The signatures on the letter of this request included that of John Letcher. Ruffner agreed to it, saying that he would compose such a publication and that it would comprise "the substance of the argument as delivered by me, enriched and strengthened by some of the impressive views exhibited by several of yourselves." This was done and a vigorous pamphlet was published, expressing great opposition to the institution of slavery. It was pointed out that, as John Letcher was a member of the Franklin Society, and, as was mentioned in the above quotation,

9
Supra, 2.

10

To the People of Virginia," Political Pamphlets, XXXVII, 4-5.

opinions of members of the Society would be used; therefore,
this address embodied the views of John Letcher on slavery and
11
he sanctioned it.

As candidate for Governor, Letcher declared in a letter to
the public that when he became "candidate for a seat in the Re-
form Convention, the subject, having been alluded to in the pro-
gress of the canvass, I avowed, in my speech to the people of
Augusta, that I had changed my opinion; and stated that if my
fidelity to the institution was distrusted by any man, it was
his duty to oppose my election to the position I sought at the
hands of the people. I was elected and my course in the Conven-
tion, and for the past seven sessions in Congress, on all matters
connected with slavery, will attest the sincerity of my con-
12

victions." He went on to say that the published address was
very different from the "calm argument on the social and pol-
13
itical influence of slavery," and that it contained many things
contrary to his views and that he and all other but one re-
fused to aid in its publication. There followed additional
letters by Letcher and replies by Ruffner, also comments on

11

Ibid.,5.

12

Ibid.,6.

13

Ibid.

Letcher's speeches which pointed out his aversion to slavery industrially, commercially, socially, and that he had on every issue, concerning constitutional protection of slavery, been on the opposing side.¹⁴ The pamphlet closes with these hostile and condemning words. "The limits of this pamphlet might be almost indefinitely extended with other extracts, showing the past opinions and career of John Letcher. But surely these must be enough... Though for many years a prominent and public man, Virginia born and bred, he asks the charity of oblivion for nearly the whole of his life ~~←~~not for political transgressions of any ordinary character, but for heresies which it is unpardonable for any Virginian to entertain...the people of all parties should rise up and as one man repudiate the claims to the suffrages of Virginians of the man whose career has been disclosed by the fore-¹⁵going authenticated facts."

This is another example of history not revealing all the truth. Of course Letcher's opponents threw upon his actions the worse light possible. That is supposedly politics. But, regardless of this, there must be some essence of truth in this com-

¹⁴
Ibid., 9-28.

¹⁵
Ibid., 28-29.

pilation as regards Letcher's actions and words in the fight for the division of Virginia. There is no way to know what really existed in his mind except by his recorded words; and these can be interpreted as desired. Suffice it to say that Letcher declared he had changed his views and that throughout the rest of his public career he acted in an upright, irreproachable manner.

Although the path Letcher had traveled since his early days of struggling to gain his ambition for education had been a hard one, he did not realize what a really arduous task was until he began his term as Governor of Virginia. He had been elected to lead Virginia through what was to be the darkest period in her history. But, he was a man accustomed to obstacles lying in his way. Each of these he had tackled and overcome, much in the manner as had his contemporary Lincoln. He was, as was Lincoln, a self-made man. As R. A. Brock expresses it, "As much as man may of himself alone be the arbiter of his life's own destiny, was he the exemplification of the hackneyed term 'self-made'. His success is an enduring beacon to aspiring youth, and an assurance of what integrity, industry, and lofty purpose may accomplish in the race of life."

16

R. A. Brock, op. cit., 383.

Into this office Letcher went whole-heartedly and earnestly. His acts were done according to the dictates of his conscience and convictions. He held out for what he thought was right against overwhelming odds and popular sentiment, as will be shown in the period concerning secession. "Though others may have accorded the origination of great measures, his was a moral influence of which few politicians may boast. His political creed was 'strict construction, frugality in public expenditure, honesty in the public servant;' and in very truth he was a jealous guardian of the Constitution-- the citadel of American liberty -- and an uncompromising sentinel, challenging every infraction of the invested rights of the nation... He knew no policy inconsistent with his duty to his State... his motto was Virginia, first, last, and always."¹⁷

One of his first acts was the disposition of a statue of Henry Clay. While the 'mill boy of the slashes' was living, the Whig leaders of Virginia raised money to erect a statue of him. The contract was given to Hart, an eminent sculptor of the day, who went to Florence, Italy to execute the task. After many years of delay, the statue at last reached Richmond. There was a great

17

Ibid.,384.

deal of discussion as to where to place it, some suggesting Church Hill and others Main Street. The legislature granted permission to place it in Capitol Square at such a place as the Governor should designate. Letcher selected a site near ninth and Franklin Streets. The foundation was laid and the statue unveiled on Clay's birthday, April 12, 1860.¹⁸

The Presidential election of 1860 caused the South to be intensely angry and upset. Many realized now what was in store for the Nation. Lincoln's vote in Virginia totaled 0. Letcher expressed himself, saying the slave-holding states should resist the election of a Republican to the Presidency. He was particularly antagonistic toward Lincoln. "The idea of permitting such a man to have control of the army and navy of the United States and the appointment of high judicial and executive officers cannot be entertained for a moment."¹⁹ W. H. T. Squires, from whose book I am quoting, expresses the opinion that this statement of a "sentiment marks Governor Letcher a politician; not a statesman, yet he was considered a strong Union man."²⁰

Abolition agitation ~~agitation~~ soon began to ferment, causing upheavals throughout the Nation. Several attempts were made to

18

This statue has since been removed and now stands with many other great Virginians in the old hall of the House of Delegates in the State Capitol, Richmond, Virginia. G. E. Dodson, The Capitol of the Commonwealth of Virginia at Richmond, 72.

¹⁹ W. H. T. Squires, op. cit., 472.

20

Ibid.

settle the question peaceably, but to no avail. The Crittenden proposal of establishing the old compromise line, 36 degrees 30 minutes from Missouri to the Pacific, would have prevented an immediate crisis and for a while protected slavery, The Republicans, however, balked and demanded the banishment of slavery from the terretories. Events soon reached their natural, though undesirable, end -- Civil War. Secession began and seven of the cotton states had withdrawn from the Union. Four others hesitated, Virginia among them. In that fatal year of 1861, on January the seventh, Governor Letcher summoned the General Assembly to decide upon Virginia's position in the conflict." 21

He addressed the Assembly:

"The times are indeed full of peril and danger and demand from those who are clothed with representative trusts, coolness, calmness and firmness, united with prudence, wisdom, moderation, and patriotism. Indecision or indiscretion, passion, or prejudice, heedlessness or recklessness, will precipitate results that may be deplored... A blunder at such a time is a crime. An error committed now can never perhaps be corrected..."

"Confidence has been destroyed; fraternal feeling has been supplanted by intense sectional hate; the spirit of conciliation has been smothered...Unity of feeling, unity of action is now gone..."

"Surely no people have been blessed as we have been, and it is melancholy to think that all now is

21

Ibid., 472-474.

about to be sacrificed upon the altar of passion...

"The necessity is manifest, and the duty to adopt all constitutional measures before we resort to the ultimate remedy of secession is imperative. Is it not monstrous to see a government like ours destroyed, merely because men cannot agree about a domestic institution which existed at the formation of the government, and which is now recognized by fifteen out of the thirty-three states compromising the Union?...

"In my canvass for the office I now hold, I declared my opinion frankly and fearlessly on this question... In a written address 'to the voters of Virginia' I stated, 'Should it be the pleasure of the people to elevate me to the office of governor, I will endeavor in my administration to carry out the time honored state rights principle of Virginia; if it shall at any time interfere with the rights of slaveholders in our state, I will be prepared, with the aid of the people, to resist any efforts to coerce us into submission. I will resist any attempt of federal troops to cross our line to execute such unjust, iniquitous and unconstitutional laws, either in Virginia or in any other southern state.' My position now on this question is what it was then... I will regard an attempt to pass federal troops across the territory of Virginia, for the purpose of coercing a southern seceding state, as an act of invasion, which should be met and repelled...

"That your action may be guided and controlled by wisdom and patriotism; that your proceedings may be conducted in a spirit of harmony and conciliation; that the honor, the rights, and the institutions of this commonwealth may be vindicated, protected, and preserved, and that our common country may be relieved from the horrors of the threatened anarchy and civil strife, is my earnest wish."22

22

'Virginia Governor John Letcher's Message', Political Pamphlets, XXVII, 1-55, ét. passim.

These excerpts from Letcher's speech reveal much about the man. He grasped the full meaning of the slumbering conflict. He realized what disastrous results it would effect. He suggested that calmness and deliberation be employed before any step was taken, fully aware of the fatality of a wrong move at so crucial point. He expounded the principle of states rights and the fact that coercion had no part in that principle. And true, he tried every means he could to prevent Virginia's secession, but he did not hesitate one moment when he felt that her rights were being ignored in the early moments of the brewing of the war, i. e., when he received a demand for Virginia's quota of soldiers to aid in forcing South Carolina back into the Union. ²³

At Governor Letcher's recommendation , the Assembly decided to elect a Constitutional Convention to declare whether any action that might be taken to change the relationship of Virginia with the Federal Union should be submitted to the people for approval or rejection. The State approved the Convention and one hundred and fifty delegates were elected, men of ability and of varied sentiments. On February nineteenth an appeal to join the seceded states was made to Virginia. ²⁴

23

Infra, 15.

24

W. H. T. Squires, op. cit., 473-474.

After a month a committee was sent by the Convention to interview Lincoln and to ascertain what were his intentions and plans. Unfortunately Fort Sumter was attacked at this moment and Lincoln sent a curt, written reply to the effect that he would use force. This was a definite blunder made by Lincoln. It alienated the committee which had expected more consideration from the President of the United States. This note also served to bring those members of the committee who were against secession over to the point of view then held by the rest of the cotton states.

25

The surrender of Fort Sumter was the action that ignited the spark. "At the news of the surrender Richmond went frantic with delight. Thousands of people marched in procession to the Capitol, and the Fayette Artillery fired one hundred guns in honor of the victory. They next proceeded to the Governor's house and Letcher made a few remarks, which, however, were interrupted by hisses, as lacking sufficient enthusiasm for secession. The crowd then returned to the Capitol, pulled down the Federal flag, and for three hours the Southern flag floated in the breeze. Governor Letcher, however, though ready to protect

25

Ibid., 475-476.

Virginia, if attacked, had no intention of allowing the excitement of the moment to carry her into the Confederace. He therefore ordered the Confederate flag hauled down, and the Stars and Stripes were again raised over the Capitol.²⁶

A few days after the committee had been rebuffed by Lincoln, Virginia's quota of soldiers was demanded to assist in forcing South Carolina back into the Union.²⁷ Governor Letcher sent this reply to the Secretary of War:

"I have only to say that the militia of Virginia will not be furnished for the powers at Washington for any such use or purpose as they have in view. Your object is to subjugate the Southern States and the requisition made upon me for such an object--an object in my judgement not within the purview of the Constitution or the act of 1795, will not be complied with. You have chosen to inaugurate civil war; and having done so we will meet you in a spirit as determined as the Administration has shown toward the South."²⁸

The Convention passed the ordinance of secession, April 17, 1861, with a vote of 88 to 55, showing that Virginia might have been held in the Union.²⁹ Governor Letcher, on April 22, 1861, appointed, with the consent of the Convention, Colonel Robert E. Lee Commander-in-chief of the Naval and Military forces of Virginia. He was received with great acclaim by the Convention as

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Robert McMutt McElroy, Jefferson Davis, The Unreal and The Real, I, 301.

²⁷

Supra, 13.

²⁸

Beverly Bland Munford, Virginia's Attitude Toward Slavery and Secession, 282, quoting Greeley, American Conflict, I, 459.

²⁹

W. H. T. Squires, op.cit., 476-477.

well as by the populace.³⁰ In May the Confederate Capitol was
moved to Richmond.³¹

"Governor Letcher loved the Union deeply, and his voice was raised for moderation, conciliation, and for peace; but when Virginia severed her bonds from the government she had so largely helped to establish, then her loyal Governor stood by her side."³² Once Governor Letcher saw the course which it was his duty as Governor to follow, he threw himself whole-heartedly into the cause. "It was at his instance that the state forces were at once placed at the disposal of the Confederate Government, without waiting for the vote of the people."³³ We find from Letcher's correspondence that he supplied arms to states other than Virginia.³⁴

When a call to arms was sent to western Virginia, there was such repugnance in that part of the state to secession that a convention was held at Wheeling, June 11, 1861, "and the members before proceeding to business joined in an oath of allegiance to the United States...and on the nineteenth a declaration of independence from Virginia was unanimously adopted."³⁵

³⁰ William Elizabeth Brooks, Lee of Virginia, 99.

³¹ W. H. T. Squires, op. cit., 478.

³² Margaret Vowell Smith, Virginia, 1492-1892, 377.

³³ Lyon Gardiner Tyler, ed., Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, III, 3.

³⁴ Official Correspondence of John Letcher (Southern Historical Society Papers), I, 11.

³⁵ General C. A. Evans, ed., Confederate Military History, II, 11.

Governor Letcher, during this convention issued a proclamation, June 14, saying that a vote had been taken and a majority had voted to unite with the Confederacy.

"You, as well as the rest of the state, have cast your vote and the majority is against you. It is the duty of good citizens to yield to the will of the State...the government at Washington...by the exercise of despotic power is endeavoring to coerce our people to abject submission to their authority. Virginia has asserted her independence...The troops are posted at Huttonville. Come with your own good weapons and meet them as brothers."³⁶

Nevertheless, encouraged by the early success of the Union army, proceedings went forward and a new separate state was formed and recognized by the Federal Government — West Virginia.³⁷

The records available disclose no public actions of Governor Letcher during the remainder of his term of office. These years, however, were naturally filled with the battles, military and personal, which brought ruin and heartbreak to every loyal Southerner.

Letcher's home near Lexington was burned by Union soldiers on June 12, 1864. He was given ten minutes notice and was able to save nothing of the many priceless possessions, including his

36

Ibid., 11-12.

37

Ibid., 12-13.

valuable law books. The beautiful house was sacked and pillaged and met the fate of so many other southern mansions; it was burned to the ground.

38

Soon afterward, Letcher was taken prisoner and put in solitary confinement in the old Capitol prison in Washington. His top clothes and shoes were taken from him lest he attempt to escape. His public and private papers were confiscated and now form a part of "The Record of Rebellion". He was compelled by necessity to accept a small pittance for valuable Washington property. He was released after the War, with no definite charge against him, a broken man. Returning to Lexington, he remained there for some time, bound by restrictions by the Federal Government. He was not allowed to leave the town without a written permission from the President. As his reputation as a distinguished lawyer had spread abroad, he was offered many cases in other counties and states. But, when the required permit to leave Lexington was sought, it invariably encountered so much red-tape that, by the time consent was obtained, it was too late to undertake the case in question. His imprisonment, followed by the nerve-wracking restrictions, greatly impaired his

38

Margaret Letcher Showell, Ex-Governor Letcher's Home, (Southern Historical Society Papers), XVIII, 394.

health. In time, however, he rebuilt to a certain degree his
39
lost fortune.

In 1866, Letcher made an address at the Virginia Military Institute, the occasion being the dedication of a statue of George Washington. It was, to my mind, an excellent speech and important in that he defended Virginia's actions during the War.

"We have passed through a terrific strife, which has brought sorrow and distress upon many a happy household, which has prostrated the business of the country, checked the development of its resources, paralyzed its energies, and visited upon countless thousands, poverty and ruin. I would be false to all my convictions, false to the honored mother who gave me birth, false to every obligation of duty and patriotism, if I could on an occasion like this, fail to raise my voice in her defense, against the imputation that she and the South were chargeable with originating this war. It is not so, my countrymen. No honest man can, in my opinion, lay his hand upon his heart, appeal to God for the strength of his convictions, and conscientiously declare that this war is justly chargeable to us. It was forced upon us, and mainly by the political parsons, and the politicians of New England. But for their unceasing assaults upon the institutions of the South, continued year after year, we should never have had a war between the sections composin the Union.

"For years past, it has been apparent to the most casual observer, that the controversy thus provoked and carried on would end in bloodshed, sooner or

later. No appeal, no warning, from patriotic men in either section, could control or influence this spirit. It was persistent, in compromising, vindictive, malignant, and apparently indifferent of consequences. It pursued its object steadily and with a devotion that neither flagged nor faltered. Its purpose was the extermination of slavery, peaceably if possibly, but if not, then through blood and carnage. It sought power and demanded the control of the government, and it selected the means best calculated to secure the end, and upon the principle that the end justifies the means. It was insolent, overbearing, exacting in its demands and would be satisfied with nothing less than abject submission to its behests."⁴⁰

He then went to point out to his listeners the policy which he had followed during the war and to analyze the governmental framework of the United States, which sets up the state as being sovereign; therefore, the allegiance of the citizen is first to his state.

"The Federal Government being the result of the action of sovereign states, the citizen of the State occupied the relation of fidelity toward it, so long as his State remained one of the States of the Union."⁴¹

When a state withdrew from the Union, the citizen then owes allegiance and fidelity to the state. Letcher here pointed out that besides his reasoning, he was pledged by his oath as Governor to execute and abide by her laws. Had he gone against

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John Letcher, Address on the Re-inauguration of the Bronze Statue of George Washington, 13-14.

⁴¹

Ibid., 14.

his State, in spite of his vigorous desire for peace, he would have been guilty of treason. "I did what my conscience approved, and I have no apology to make, excuse to offer, for any of my official acts." ⁴² He said that Virginia, in becoming a State in the Union, pledged herself to a certain relation between Union and State. States rights was one of these. When, therefore, it seemed expedient to secede from the Union, there was no idea that the action would be questioned. She took her stand by what she believed to be right. She put the issues of controversy to the sword.

"Thus defeated--this overcome-- the Southern people regard the questions at issue as settled, and forever settled. They accept the result and are prepared to abide by it in good faith. They pledge an honor that is untarnished; and when brave men and honest men give such a pledge, who can doubt their sincerity and who can hesitate to believe that their pledge will be redeemed to the letter."⁴³

He then showed his openmindedness and sensibility by pointing out that all of the turmoil, jealousies and horror of the war was now in the past and must be forgotten, that there must be fraternity and co-operation in order to rebuild and to carry on the re-established Union. There must be harmony so as to re-

42

Ibid., 16.

43

Ibid., 18.

vive trade and business and to create a nation respected and
loved at home and abroad.⁴⁴

In May, 1869, Letcher wrote a circular, which was published by the Virginia Military Institute Board of Visitors. It was a plea for financial aid from Virginia, five cents from each inhabitant to the county courts to complete a report of the physical resources of Virginia; to publish and circulate it abroad, to encourage immigration. Virginia, he said, had no lands nor money to offer as an inducement but does possess natural beauty, excellent climate, and natural resources.⁴⁵

In 1875 Letcher appeared again in public life. He was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates. In that year he originated the "well-known 'dog-law' for the protection of sheep husbandry."⁴⁶

The following year, he was stricken with paralysis while in attendance at the House, from which he suffered for eight years. The General Assembly, "to show their appreciation of his public services, passed a joint resolution providing for the payment of all expenses incident upon his illness, but with lofty patriotism he gratefully but firmly declined the provision. He

⁴⁴

Ibid., 18, et seq.

⁴⁵

John Letcher, (circular published by Virginia Military Institute Board of Visitors, May 8, 1869), broadside.

⁴⁶

R. A. Brock, op. cit., 384.

said 'The precedent is an unsafe one at all times, and especially so now in the distressed condition of our people, whose lot I claim to be my lot.'⁴⁷"

John Letcher died on January 26, 1884. On January twenty-seventh, the General Assembly was informed of his death by Governor Cameron. "It is my melancholy duty to communicate to your bodies the death of John Letcher (formerly Governor of the Commonwealth) which occurred this morning at Lexington. The long life so ended was full of high and honorable service to the State. All departments of the government and all classes of our people should unite in mourning for the loss, and in reverent tribute to memory of a wise, honest and patriotic son of Virginia."⁴⁸

Two members were appointed from the Senate and three from the House of Delegates were appointed to attend the funeral. A Preamble and Resolution were adopted and a copy sent to his family, his widow, Mary Holt Letcher, and seven children, to show the concern and sorrow of the Assembly, viz:

"Through a life-time covering the most eventful period in the history of Virginia, the great powers of his mind and the warm affections of his heart were devoted with constant faithfulness and

47

Ibid., 384.

48

Daily Dispatch, (Richmond, Virginia), Jan. 27, 1884.

energy to the service of his State and Country. As a representative of Virginia in the Congress of the United States, as her governor in the most trying epoch of her history, he won the love and admiration of her people, and a place in that history where his name will live as long as unswerving honesty in the administration of public trust and great ability, wisdom, and patriotism in the discharge of official duty shall be honored among men."49

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