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# Crucible of the Civil War: Virginia from Secession to Commemoration

Edward L. Ayers

*University of Richmond*, [eayers@richmond.edu](mailto:eayers@richmond.edu)

Gary W. Gallagher

Andrew J. Torget

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CRUCIBLE OF  
THE CIVIL  
WAR



*Virginia*  
*from Secession*  
*to Commemoration*

*Edited by* Edward L. Ayers, Gary W. Gallagher,  
*and* Andrew J. Torget

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## Introduction



Gary W. Gallagher

Virginia offers a feast of subjects for anyone interested in exploring the Confederate experience or the Civil War more broadly defined. The state endured a bitter internal debate about secession in 1861 that eventually led to the loss of its mountainous western counties, which joined the United States as West Virginia in 1863. Yet even as their western brethren departed, most citizens in Confederate Virginia overcame prewar divisions to achieve a striking sense of national purpose. Armies campaigning within the state's borders fought a number of the most famous battles in American history, slaughtering each other in profusion and creating enormous disruption among the civilian population. To a degree unparalleled elsewhere during the conflict, Virginians in the most heavily contested areas of the state struggled to cope with a battlefield and a home front that literally blended together. Virginia's decision to join the Confederacy undoubtedly lengthened the conflict, opening the way for dramatic social and economic changes among its white and black residents that would have been unthinkable to most observers in 1861. From the opening engagement at First Bull Run on July 21, 1861, until the surrender of the Confederacy's principal field army at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, foreign observers, members of the rival national governments, and citizens in the eastern regions of both the United States and the Confederacy

(where most of the populations lived) most often looked to Virginia to gauge the progress of the war. The state was thus central to expectations and fluctuations of morale on both sides—a phenomenon evident from the outset of the war.

Abraham Lincoln gave particular attention to Virginia in his message of July 4, 1861, to a Congress called into special session to deal with the breakup of the Union. Detailing his response to the process by which eleven states had formed a new slaveholding republic, the president singled Virginia out among the four Upper South states that had withdrawn from the Union following his call for volunteers in the wake of Fort Sumter. Pro-Union sentiment had been repressed in Tennessee, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Virginia, observed Lincoln, but “[t]he course taken in Virginia was the most remarkable—perhaps the most important.” Virginia’s leaders had ordered the seizure of U.S. military property at Harpers Ferry and Norfolk and “received—perhaps invited—into their state, large bodies of troops, with their warlike appointments, from the so-called seceded States.” Most ominously, Virginia had allowed “the insurrectionary government” of the Confederacy to be transferred from Montgomery, Alabama, to Richmond. “The people of Virginia have thus allowed this giant insurrection to make its nest within her borders,” remarked Lincoln with evident anger, “and this [U.S.] government has no choice left but to deal with it, *where* it finds it.”<sup>1</sup>

Well might Lincoln direct hard words toward Virginia, for he knew that its actions dramatically altered the landscape of the looming conflict. Repressing a rebellion of seven Deep South states had posed enough of a challenge to the U.S. government and its loyal citizenry, but Virginia’s secession undoubtedly enhanced Confederate chances for success. Less than three weeks after Lincoln’s message went to Congress, the battle of First Bull Run, a smashing Confederate victory fought thirty miles from Washington near Manassas Junction, featured Virginia generals and soldiers and ended any thoughts of a quick end to the national crisis.

The fledgling Southern government similarly understood the Old Dominion’s importance. On April 22, five days after Virginia’s convention voted to leave the United States, Vice President Alexander H. Stephens had visited Richmond to make a case for the Confederacy. As part of the wooing, he held out the promise of making Richmond the new national capital: “The enemy is now on your border—almost at your door—he must be met. This can best be done by having your military operations under the common head at Montgomery—or it may be at Richmond. . . . [I]t is quite within the range of probability that, if such an alliance is made, the

seat of our government will, within a few weeks, be moved to this place. . . . [S]hould Virginia become, as it probably will, the theatre of the war, the whole may be transferred here. . . . We want the voice of Virginia in our Confederate Councils.”<sup>2</sup>

Stephens and other members of the Confederate government wanted more than Virginia’s voice—they wanted Virginia’s impressive human, industrial, and agricultural resources.<sup>3</sup> A short catalog will underscore just how much Virginia had to offer. In 1860, it boasted a white population of approximately 1.1 million, the largest among the seceded states, and during the war drew from its two hundred thousand military-age white males to supply more soldiers than any other Confederate state. Its nearly five hundred thousand slaves, again the largest number in any Confederate state, would figure prominently in the South’s wartime economy. Virginia possessed one-fifth of both the Confederacy’s railroad mileage and its assessed value of farmland and buildings. Richmond stood as the new nation’s preeminent manufacturing center, with more than a dozen iron foundries, several rolling mills, fifty iron and metal works, and huge flour mills. The Tredegar Iron Works, easily the most important manufacturing establishment in the Confederacy, would produce an enormous amount of ordnance and other war-related matériel during four years of fighting. Southwestern Virginia contained vital sources of salt, lead, and coal (some of these lay in what would become West Virginia), and the Shenandoah Valley and Piedmont region ranked among the most important granaries in the South, growing wheat, corn, fruits, and other crops in abundance. In sum, Virginia possessed vital logistical riches for a nation soon to be waging a massive war.

Beyond men to don gray uniforms, factories to put muskets and ammunition into their hands, and farms to produce food to fill their stomachs, Virginia gave the Confederacy an invaluable tie to the generation that had founded the American republic. Politicians on both sides of the Potomac River cast themselves as inheritors and protectors of the revolutionary tradition. How better for Confederates to bolster such credentials than to claim the birthplace of George Washington—indisputably the central figure of the Revolutionary period—and Virginia’s three other presidents, who had guided the American republic for thirty-two of its first forty years? Whether in Patrick Henry’s ringing words of defiance against encroaching British power or in George Washington’s steadfast leadership and immense symbolic stature, Confederates could find comforting reassurance that they had taken the high road in their own attempt at nation-building. Virginia’s importance in this regard scarcely can be overesti-

mated, as evidenced, most obviously, by the Confederacy's placing George Washington on its Great Seal.<sup>4</sup>

Virginia also supplied the man who would function as the Confederate equivalent of General Washington. During the course of the war, Robert E. Lee, the son of Revolutionary War military hero Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee, eclipsed Jefferson Davis and all other politicians and generals as the Confederacy's most admired figure. Many Confederates explicitly compared Lee to Washington. The general consciously patterned himself after Washington, and his wife, Mary Anna Custis Lee, was the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington. Writing in late 1862, for example, a Georgia woman expressed thanks "that in this great struggle the head of our army is a noble son of Virginia, and worthy of the intimate relation in which he stands connected with our immortal Washington." Similarly, Peter W. Alexander, an influential Confederate war correspondent, wrote of Lee: "Like Washington, he is a wise man, and a good man, and possesses in an eminent degree those qualities which are indispensable in the great leader and champion upon whom the country rests its hope." Alexander added that the Confederacy "should feel grateful that Heaven has raised up one in our midst so worthy of our confidence and so capable to lead"—the "grand-son of Washington, so to speak . . . the wise and modest chief who commands the Army of Northern Virginia." Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, like Washington and the Continental army, became their country's most important national institution, a rallying point that inspired white Southerners to hope for independence.<sup>5</sup>

Virginia also accounted for a disproportionately high number of officers among the Confederacy's high and midlevel command. Of 425 Confederate generals, 91 were born in Virginia; Tennessee, with 50, and Georgia and South Carolina, with 48 each, ranked second, third, and fourth. Among Virginia's most important generals were Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, second only to Lee as a Confederate military icon, the flamboyant cavalryman James E. B. "Jeb" Stuart, and infantry corps commanders Jubal A. Early, Richard S. Ewell, and A. P. Hill. The Virginia Military Institute sent more than eighteen hundred men into the Southern army, almost all of whom served under Lee. The presence of so many officers with a military background helped make the Army of Northern Virginia a formidable opponent for U.S. forces in the Eastern theater. No other Confederate state contributed a comparable body of soldiers with formal training.<sup>6</sup>

The Virginia countryside across which Lee and his army maneuvered and fought commanded attention beyond that of any other military

arena.<sup>7</sup> Several factors conspired to create this phenomenon. Virginia's location on the national frontier opposite Washington, D.C., lent special significance to battles fought on its territory. The presence of the two largest and most famous armies of the war—the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac—further boosted Virginia's visibility, as did the frightful scale of human carnage. Of the roughly 1.1 million casualties suffered by the two sides, more than 350,000 fell in Virginia (the addition of Lee's battles in Maryland and Pennsylvania swells the number to nearly 450,000). Tennessee and Georgia, which witnessed just more than 100,000 and just fewer than 90,000 battle casualties, respectively, finished a distant second and third in this grim reckoning. The four major battles fought within fifteen miles of Fredericksburg exacted a more grisly butcher's bill than all the battles combined in any other state, highlighting Virginia's status as the bloody cockpit of the war.

Have historians fully exploited Confederate Virginia as a remarkably rich topic for description and analysis? The answer is yes and no. The military side of Virginia's war has been exhaustively examined. Beginning with publications by former Confederates and Federals, extending through influential work by Douglas Southall Freeman and Bruce Catton between the 1930s and the 1960s, and continuing down to the present in an array of popular and scholarly books and articles, Virginia's military campaigns and the men who orchestrated and fought them have received ample and sometimes mind-numbingly detailed attention. Scarcely any battle or skirmish of any importance lacks a monograph (many of the big battles have inspired multiple treatments), and biographers have explored the lives of even many second- and third-echelon commanders. Some of the best recent work, such as George C. Rable's massive study of the battle of Fredericksburg, has undertaken the necessary work of examining battles within a context that includes both military consequences and impact on the home fronts. Whatever a reader's appetite regarding military events in Virginia, the literature almost certainly has something to offer.<sup>8</sup>

The same cannot be said for other dimensions of Virginia's wartime experience. In an essay on scholarship relating to Virginia and the Confederacy published fifteen years ago, I noted "the availability of both excellent potential topics and ample sources with which to study them" but lamented the fact that Virginia was poorly represented in books devoted to the home front.<sup>9</sup> There has been some gratifying progress since I made those observations. William A. Link's work on late-antebellum Virginia politics, William Blair's on questions of popular will in the midst of severe hardship, Peter S. Carmichael's on generational attitudes toward secession

and war, Ervin L. Jordan Jr.'s on African Americans, Anne Sarah Rubin's on Confederate national sentiment, and community and regional studies by Edward L. Ayers, Daniel W. Crofts, Carol Kettenburg Dubbs, Ernest B. Furgurson, Kenneth W. Noe, Daniel E. Sutherland, Steven Elliott Tripp, and Brian Steel Wills have contributed significantly to our knowledge about wartime Virginia. Yet much remains to be examined. For example, we need to know more about such subjects as the dynamics of Virginia's slaveholding society, the refugee experience, the role of religion, tensions between national and local sentiment and between different geographical sections of the state, and the ways in which postwar Virginians understood and explained secession and their Confederate experience. For all the wartime topics, connections between the military and nonmilitary spheres must be brought into sharpest relief.<sup>10</sup>

The contributors to this book add important brush strokes to a portrait in progress of Virginia during the era of the Civil War. Even veteran readers will find valuable material in the essays, which collectively muster new evidence, present fresh interpretations, and remind us of how much remains to be written about the Confederacy's most important state.

#### Notes

1. Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:426–27.

2. Alexander H. Stephens quoted in Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederate State of Richmond: A Biography of the Capital* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 13.

3. For convenient summaries of data concerning Virginia's population, wealth, manufacturing potential, and agricultural production, see J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, revised 2nd ed. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1969), tables on pp. 5, 8; Richard N. Current et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*, 4 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 4:1663–64 (essay titled "Virginia" by James I. Robertson Jr.); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 1:462; Thomas, *Confederate State of Richmond*, 21–24; Ella Lonn, *Salt as a Factor in the Confederacy* ([Tuscaloosa]: University of Alabama Press, 1965), 19–34.

4. The figure on the Great Seal copied the equestrian statue of Washington by sculptor Thomas Crawford, which was unveiled on the Capitol grounds in Richmond in 1858.



5. Mary Jones to Col. Charles C. Jones Jr., December 19, 1862, in Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 1001; *Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, December 5, 1862.

6. For states of birth for all Civil War generals, see James Spencer, comp., *Civil War Generals: Categorical Listings and a Biographical Directory* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986). For the importance of the V.M.I. graduates, see Richard M. McMurry, *Two Great Rebel Armies: An Essay in Confederate Military History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 98–105.

7. As with almost every dimension of the Civil War, historians have argued about which military theater was most important. Scholars such as Thomas L. Connelly, Richard M. McMurry, Herman Hattaway, and Archer Jones have insisted that Lost Cause writers, who placed Lee at the center of their interpretation of the war, attributed too much influence to events in Virginia. These arguments overlook compelling wartime testimony that leaves little doubt that most people at the time, North and South and in London and Paris, considered Virginia the theater of decisive action. Appomattox represented the unequivocal end of the conflict to almost all contemporary observers because, despite the presence of scores of thousands of Confederate soldiers under arms elsewhere, it marked the end of the war in Virginia and of Lee's ability to inspire hope among white Southerners.

8. See George C. Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Shortly after Rable's book appeared, Francis Augustin O'Reilly published a detailed, well-researched tactical study of the battle titled *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003). Totalling more than thirteen hundred pages between them, these two books supply enough information about the one-day battle and its impact to satisfy even the most inquisitive readers, while at the same time underscoring the degree to which Virginia's military experience has inspired a large literature. For a sense of how prominently campaigns and commanders in Virginia have figured in writings about the war, see David J. Eicher, *The Civil War in Books: An Analytical Bibliography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

9. Gary W. Gallagher, "Home Front and Battlefield: Some Recent Literature Relating to Virginia and the Confederacy," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 98 (April 1990): 135–36.

10. See William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); William Blair, *Virginia's Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy, 1861–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Peter S. Carmichael, *The Last Generation: Young Virginians in Peace, War, and Reunion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Ervin L. Jordan Jr., *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees*

*in Civil War Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Anne Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861–1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1863* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834–1869* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992); Carol Kettenburg Dubbs, *Defend This Old Town: Williamsburg during the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002); Ernest B. Furgurson, *Ashes of Glory: Richmond at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Daniel E. Sutherland, *Seasons of War: The Ordeal of a Confederate Community, 1861–1865* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Steven Elliott Tripp, *Yankee Town, Southern City: Race and Class Relations in Civil War Lynchburg* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); and Brian Steel Wills, *The War Hits Home: The Civil War in Southeastern Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).