

## **Americans Stumble into Civil War**

*By Arley McCormick*

In June 1859 communities in the North and South were preparing to celebrate July 4<sup>th</sup>. Few residents were unaware of the debates and political compromises regarding the existence and expansion of slavery. There was no avoiding the abolitionist attacks and fire eater rhetoric calling for secession yet few believed war would become reality.

In the 40 years prior to war, the Southern cotton economy grew each year along with the public debate regarding slavery. Journalists, writers, and politicians built their constituencies by opposing or defending the issue. The South controlled the world cotton economy and it reached its greatest worth by 1860 and the national government was well aware of the potential financial impact of secession.

Historians have written thousands of pages explaining the differences between the people living in the North and the South. But the differences may be exaggerated. Two hundred and fifty years before the Civil War the majority of the colonists were from England, Scotland, and Ireland and mostly protestant. They were led by aristocrats with charters issued by the King and those charters gave the leaders the authority to sell land. Climate and soil conditions in the South supported agriculture and the shorter growing season in the North suited the staples of corn, wheat, and vegetables better than tobacco, sugar cane, and cotton.

Initially, most residents were engaged in subsistence farming but as the population expanded a merchant class grew. The colonies, vassals of European governments, sold raw material and in return bought their finished products. As the population expanded cottage industries began to include limited manufacturing. Manufacturing on American soil increased inter-colony trade and over time decreased the dependency on European sources. But cottage industries could not provide all the goods to sustain the population.

As other nationalities came to take advantage of cheap land, they influenced the culture. Religious freedom initially beckoned colonists yet a growing population became less tolerant of established religions. Shakers, Mormons, Quakers, and other concepts emerged and they added topics including women's suffrage, abstaining from the use of alcohol, workers unions, and, of course, abolition. All topics of discussion in the South as well.

The family unit was similar in both the North and the South and they enjoyed similar recreation, i.e., board games like chess, checkers, and backgammon. Horse racing and gambling were favorite pastimes. They played a variety of card games of which poker was one and they gambled with dice. These acceptable pastimes also provoked less tolerance than others. After 1820 the political activity began to affect

households directly and the tenor defined regional differences.

The age of enlightenment along with industrialization ushered change. In the North the concept of a Southern of aristocratic planters, beautiful southern belles, poor white trash, faithful household slaves, and superstitious field hands became the foundation for books and song. The agricultural society sustained by the plantation class, Protestantism, elite, respect for women, the importance of name, codes of honor to defend one's character, a polite demeanor, were all characterizations that defined Southern life.

In the South, northerners were perceived as living to work rather than working to live. They were crusty, arrogant, disrespectful, and overtly opinionated. The southerner could not shake the plantation class conceptualized by the Northerners, possibly because much of the perceptions were true. The slower pace in the South helped sustain the more aristocratic way of life, pursuits such as fox hunting, yacht racing, billiards, theatergoing, and other forms of recreation popular in the North were not accessible to most of the southern residents. And those considered white trash or yeoman i.e. the working class that owned few or no slaves, depended on the cotton barons for their lively hood.

While Northern emigrants were piling into cities where a growing base of industrialization, entertainment, and religious interpretation was taking hold the conditions were in place to provide New England and the West with

material success even for counties that depended upon agriculture. The development of a capitalist economy drove changing attitudes while agricultural insulated southerners.

Yet similarities continued. Baseball was played in many northern cities. The first intercollegiate game was played in 1859 and other sporting events that frequently encouraged North and South competition were thoroughbred racing, foot racing, bowling, and billiards. Bare-knuckle prizefighting was a big draw. In the South planters organized and wagered on boxing matches between slaves and in the North the sport was dominated by ethnic contests between Irish Catholic immigrants and American-born Protestants. And in some universities, particularly in the North, gymnastics was introduced and men and women were encouraged to participate.

Politics and national events could not be avoided, particularly after John Brown was hanged in December of 1859. Everyone knew of the border dispute in Kansas and the anti-slavery sentiment. With John Brown's arrival, defeat, and hanging the national focus took a turn. The change manifested in a clear separation within the Democratic party, churches, and a southern focus to ensure Abraham Lincoln was not elected president. Shouting from Southern fire eaters advocating secession never ceased. All across the South many of those deemed sympathetic or loyal to the Federal government faced rage, brutality, and oral insults.

In the North the separation of the Democrats into Southern and

Northern branches and the growth of the more radical Republican party boosted a perception of the impending crisis. Yet the radical abolitionist movement was not unanimous in the North. The most opposed were the laborer's in industrial centers who feared they would lose their jobs to 4 million Africans migrating North who would work for far less. Northern politicians sympathetic to the South would earn a title; Copperhead. The Copperheads would become a source of descent against Lincoln's policies and the Northern effort to defeat the Confederacy.

Putnam County, Indiana is a good example of changing public attitudes in the Western yeoman class as, similarly, Boston's financial leaders were balancing change in the Northeastern states regarding abolition. Putnam County, originally dominated by the Whig party, supported a legal ban on blacks living in the county. It was consistent with other counties in Southern Indiana. Prejudice also included Mexicans and Catholics but the attitudes were changing with the encouragement of the Federal government for migration West after the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Arguably, 1859 is the year when political compromises began to find fewer sympathetic ears. John Brown's revolt failed but he was the catalyst that brought Civil War to the nation. The staunch abolitionist, inspired discontent in Kansas and in his final insult brought it to Harpers Ferry. His solution for the slavery dilemma was war and he conspired with other abolitionists

and financiers to instigate a slave rebellion.

Slave revolts always increased fear throughout the South, not only for the slave holding aristocracy but for the yeoman southerner. When John Brown led his army of 18 men to the Harper's Ferry, Virginia armory intending to march through Virginia freeing slaves, his efforts attracted the participation of only a hand full of slaves. And, Virginia responded with overwhelming military and judicial force. He was hanged on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1859.

John Brown's raid on the eve of an election year changed reality for many. The raid shocked the South and Southern newspapers painted the abolitionist brush on every northerner. Across the South, swift legal action was taken to minimize the risk of slave rebellions. The Republican Party was blamed and Abraham Lincoln was their leader. The moderate voices in the South were drowned out by fear and in the North hostility toward the South gripped the masses. It was a year when the politicians could no longer depend upon the compromises that supported the South's slave culture.

Sentiment north of the Tennessee River changed too. Slaves were a part of Indiana life since the French arrived in the 1700's. Many white settlers didn't want slaves because they were black and by 1840 there were three slaves in the state. Residents supported Africa colonization as a method of ending slavery and most supported Indiana's law prohibiting blacks from migrating to Indiana even while it was largely ignored and unenforced. At the same time, they

aided runaway slaves escaping to Canada. It was common knowledge that black families didn't want to immigrate to Africa yet by 1860 only 1 family remained in the county.

Putnam county depended upon agriculture and as a result supported railroad expansion and canals as a means to get their produce to market. The railroad was principally responsible for the increased availability of capital as bank loan policy became more favorable to farmers. And the county population grew because of national emigration. As a result, residents were being influenced by the temperance and women's rights discussions both topics indorsed by the growing Republican Party and largely ignored by the dyeing Whigs and Know-nothings parties.

Lincoln was a moderate candidate that appealed to the western states and those states were needed to elect a Republican president. Republicans claimed no interest in Black Rights which fit into the "Hoosiers claim to be fighting for Southern Rights". Presidential candidates seldom personally campaigned in favor of allowing their party representatives in each state to build the voter base and Indiana Republicans did not disappoint and neither did other Northern rural county leaders. They decorated wagons, organized speeches, and scheduled parades to keep the voting public entertained and excited.

Abraham Lincoln was elected president on November 6, 1860. Driven possibly by fear rather than reality, the list of states seceding

from the Union grew quickly beginning with South Carolina on December 20, 1860, and Mississippi followed on, January 9, 1861, Alabama, January 11, Florida, January 10, Georgia, January 19, Texas, February 1, and Louisiana, February 4.

Southern bravado supporting secession began to blind the population to a more realistic impact of war. In early April Louis Wigfall of Texas lingered on the Senate floor a month after Texas seceded. His remarks inspiring cheers and jeers from the gallery. "*The federal government is dead. The only question is whether we will give it a decent, peaceable, Protestant burial.*" He also predicted if war came Southern armies would march on Boston. Other Southerners of seceded state gravely departed their posts bidding farewell to old friends.

On February 4<sup>th</sup> the Confederate government was officially formed in Montgomery Alabama with Jefferson Davis, a plantation owner and Senator from Mississippi as President and Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee seceded after Fort Sumpter surrendered in April, 1861.

The majority of southerners read or heard of the emotional debate regarding slavery and tariffs but mail and money hit home. The Confederate Post Office was established on February 21, 1861 and the United States Post Office Department continued to handle the mail of the seceded states for the first few weeks of the war. But, by June 1 the Confederate Postal Service took over collection and delivery and rather than attaching

postage, letters and parcels were stamped paid. And most importantly, Confederate paper money was issued in March 1861. The Confederate dollar, referred to as "Greyback" was in circulation by April and the money was accepted as a medium of exchange with high purchasing power and it was not tied to a gold or silver standard.

The rhetoric for war grew even before Lincoln was elected President. The inflated bravado in the North and South portrayed a gloriously short war. Each believed they would quickly dispose of the other and either restore the Union or free themselves from the yoke of Union dominance.

With Lincoln president and Southern states removing themselves from the Union, Lincoln was bolstered by the knowledge that the people of the South were not unanimously supporting the new Southern Confederacy. The states of the new Confederacy were protesting against secession. In South Tennessee, a movement to form a new state of Nickajack composed of the Northeast corner of Alabama, Northwest corner of Georgia, and Southern Tennessee was aggressive. Residents of East Tennessee protested against secession and, what became, West Virginia were protesting against Virginia; counties in Mississippi and Alabama rejected their state governments session. Each incident implied a lack of unity and a willingness of the population to support the Union. It no doubt influenced Lincoln's guidance to his generals regarding how to prosecute a war.

Over 40 years of debate and political compromises was now made moot by an aggressive abolitionist, John Brown, and an unlikely candidate, Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican President that Southern leaders did not trust. Each household would feel the pain over the next few years.



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