

HISTORIANS WEIGH SECESSION VOTES

Nation's breakup carried mighty consequences; Virginia tipped the scales toward disunion

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The road to secession wasn't simple and it wasn't straight. Especially in Virginia.

That grew vividly clear yesterday as three Civil War historians--joined by hundreds of people at Fredericksburg Baptist Church--tackled the tough material of why the South, Virginia and Fredericksburg chose disunion in 1860-61.

Once war came, those decisions cost the lives of 25 percent of the white men of what became the Confederate states.

But neither side, for secession or against it, started off with a clear idea of what the political future held, University of Alabama scholar George C. Rable said.

Some thought the split would be peaceful. Some thought it would lead the South to glory. Others, including Robert E. Lee, worried about "anarchy," mob rule and what such a revolution would mean, said Rable, author of "Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!"

Both sides used extremist rhetoric and claimed their foes were anti-democratic, he said. Both claimed to stand with the Founding Fathers and the principles of the Constitution.

Virginia started off solidly against secession, with delegates at a special convention in Richmond voting 2-to-1 against it.

But President Lincoln's inaugural address, the attack on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops from the Union states--including Virginia--reversed that vote.

The end result showed that "in politics, as in life, timing means everything," Rable said, "and that a determined minority can accomplish a great deal if the majority is lethargic."

The politics of fear took hold, with more and more Southerners coming to expect the worst from the North after John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry and Abraham Lincoln's election, he said.

Red-hot rhetoric helped sweep away Virginians' usual conservatism, the historians said.

Some of those arguments came alive yesterday, with a little dramatic license, as local thespians Roy Jarnecke and Richard Chapman portrayed two Fredericksburg debates. One was between secessionist J. Horace Lacey and pro-Union legal eagle George Henry Clay Rowe, the other between Rowe (who switched sides after Lincoln's inauguration) and Unionist newspaper editor James W. Hunnicutt.

Lacey on Brown's raid: "John Brown is an agent of a powerful cabal intent on bringing vengeance against the South. This vile deed is not the end but the beginning. The 'irrepressible conflict' has just begun!"

Rowe's retort: "Passions must not be needlessly excited. That, sir, is reckless language. Slavery is as much loved by Northerners as ourselves. Do not let our leaders convince you otherwise."

1860's presidential election set tempers boiling, said John Hennessy, chairman of the area committee that's marking the 150th anniversary of the Civil War.

On Sept. 20, 1860, a political rally at Brooke Station in [Stafford County](#) erupted in a brawl between 50 backers of candidates John C. Breckenridge and Stephen A. Douglas, he said. Fists flew as they threw off their coats and jackets. One man emerged gripping a tuft of another's red hair, asking, "Whose hair is this?"

But William W. Freehling, senior scholar at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, stole the show by recounting the words and deeds of convention delegate Henry A. Wise.

In the climactic moment of Virginia's secession convention, the former governor pulled out his pocket watch and announced that--acting on his own--he had ordered state militia units to seize the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry and Norfolk's naval shipyard.

"Anybody who disagrees with me can come right up and look at this!" Wise thundered, pulling a long-barreled horse pistol from his satchel and setting it on the podium.

The stunt drew gasps from yesterday's audience.

But yesterday held solemn moments, too.

America has never faced anything as profound, with such high stakes, as in late 1860 and early 1861, Hennessy said.

And there's no better place in the country to understand Civil War than the Fredericksburg area, which saw four major battles, enormous military casualties, havoc to civilians' life and a huge exodus of slaves and their families.

"All of the milestones in the evolution of the war, from what it started as to what it became, are represented here," Hennessy said.