

## **Southerners Meet in Montgomery** **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

By the end of January 1861 the number of states seceded from the United States had grown to six: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana and Texas.

Although the most ardent secessionists believed strongly in state's rights and in states acting independently, even they soon joined more moderate voices in calling for some sort of Southern confederacy of like-minded states. On December 20, 1860, the day of South Carolina's secession, fire-eater Robert Barnwell Rhett had put out a call for other Southern states to convene to discuss the formation of a new Southern Union. Thus began the curious saga of a country composed of state's that valued their own rights more highly than those of any national entity.

Rhett suggested that the convention occur before Lincoln's inauguration in March, and so on February 4, 1861, delegates from the six seceded states convened in Montgomery, Alabama. Their hope was to form a provisional government before Lincoln became president so that they could act in a coordinated manner should Lincoln act against them. The forty-three men gathered in Montgomery were among the most prominent in the South. Thirty-nine of them were university educated, including graduates of Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the University of Virginia. Thirty-three of the men were lawyers and all but eight of them were slave holders. Many of them had held prominent public office, including judges, senators, congressmen, governors and cabinet secretaries.

Politically, the assembled delegates were not all fervent secessionist. In fact, nineteen of them favored moderation or had been opposed to secession before their states left the Union. As

they gathered together on February 4, the men began to use their experience to pull together some organization from what had been a chaotic six weeks since South Carolina seceded.

Meanwhile, on this same day there was another assembly of prominent men far to the north. This was the Washington Peace Conference, a last ditch effort to hold the Union together through political compromise rather than warfare. The conference had been pulled together at the request of former president John Tyler, acting on behalf of current president James Buchanan. 131 senior statesmen, representing seven slave-holding states and fourteen free states, met and debated for three weeks at a Presbyterian church next to the Willard Hotel.

Lincoln did not hold out hope for success of the conference and some delegates, particularly those from Massachusetts, admitted that they were merely there as observers and weren't willing to give an inch toward compromising on slavery. Many Virginians, where there was still strong pro-Union sentiment, strongly supported the gathering.

While some looked on in admiration at this gathering of experienced public servants, other derided the average age of the attendees as making them "political fossils". After three weeks of often acrimonious debate, the assembly eventually produced a proposed constitutional amendment that would extend the Missouri Compromise to the Pacific Ocean. In this way, their proposal differed little from the Crittenden Compromise that had been defeated several weeks before.

As the first week of February 1861 ended, Major Anderson and his men remained hunkered down in Fort Sumter, grimly awaiting coming events. In Pensacola, Lieutenant Slemmer and his troops awaited in similar fashion at Fort Pickens, both for coming events and for the arrival of the *U.S.S. Brooklyn*, loaded with supplies and additional fighting men.

