

## **Secession in the Old Dominion, Violence in Baltimore** **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

News of Lincoln's call for troops quickly spread through both north and south, and had particularly raised tensions in the slave states that had not yet seceded. Ultimately four additional states—Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina—would leave the Union, bringing to eleven the number of states that would join the new Confederacy. Of these the Old Dominion of Virginia was arguably the most important, with the largest population of any southern state, by far the greatest manufacturing base, and perhaps the most strategic geographical location. Nonetheless, relatively few in the state supported immediate secession in the period following Lincoln's November 1861 election, preferring instead to await events in the other southern states.

Virginia's State Convention had already voted twice against secession. Governor John Letcher, a moderate Democrat, had called for the election of a special convention to consider secession, which met for the first time in January. That body promptly voted against leaving the Union, while the state legislature proposed the formation of a Peace Convention, which met in Washington, D.C. early in 1861 but failed to organize an acceptable compromise. In early April, following Lincoln's inauguration but before the outbreak of hostilities in Charleston, the Convention had met for a second time, but once again rejected secession. After the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops, however, Virginians were ready to act. "You have chosen to inaugurate Civil War." Governor Letcher informed the president.

On April 17 the State Convention voted 88 to 55 to secede from the Union. The closeness of the vote indicated the divided nature of the state, with most of the delegates from the

western counties, where slavery was less prominent, having opposed secession. Within two years they would adopt their own constitution and move to create the new state of West Virginia. The actions of the Secession Convention would have to be ratified by a popular vote, which would be held the following month and which approved secession by a wide margin.

Governor Letcher, meanwhile, called for the formation of military units to defend the state, along with the occupation of two important military facilities in the state. Harpers Ferry in the northwest contained both an armory and arsenal that were vital to southern war-making capabilities, and state forces soon occupied it. Ultimately officials removed the weapon-making machinery from Harpers Ferry to Richmond. The other significant location was the Gosport Navy Yard near Norfolk, which the Federals belatedly attempted to destroy, but which the Virginians captured along with its vital facilities and supplies.

While the Old Dominion withdrew from the Union, Federal authorities organized the defense of Washington, which now bordered a seceded state to the south, and was encircled to the north by another state that appeared on the verge of secession. Secessionists had held a large rally in Baltimore on April 17, and the situation there seemed to deteriorate further two days later when the Sixth Massachusetts Volunteers was attacked by a pro-secession mob as it marched through the city while enroute to Washington. The troops had to change stations in Baltimore, which necessitated their movement through the city via streetcars in order to reach the new station. As the soldiers made their way, a mob blocked the streetcar line, forcing part of the regiment to march through the streets. The furious citizens shouted slurs, waved Confederate flags, and eventually began throwing stones and bricks. Shots rang out on both sides, and by the time the Massachusetts' troops had left the city, four were dead and thirty-six wounded, while the secessionist losses numbered twelve dead and more than 100 wounded. For the next several

weeks chaos reigned in Maryland, until in May when Lincoln ordered troops into the state, while suspending the writ of habeas corpus and arresting secessionist leaders. Ultimately, Maryland remained in the Union, but three more states would not.