

North Carolina Secedes, Richmond Becomes Confederate Capital **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

On May 20, 1861, North Carolina became the eleventh and final state to secede from the Union, and would soon join the new Confederate government. The state's population in 1860 was just under one million, nearly a third of whom were slaves. Nevertheless, North Carolina was hardly typical of a Deep South slave state. Its agricultural economy was much more diversified, with naval stores and tobacco playing a more important role than cotton. In addition, the western part of the state held fewer slaves, and the independent-minded voters there were less-inclined to support secession.

In 1860, a majority of North Carolinians had voted for Democrat John C. Breckinridge, though moderate John Bell received a sizable minority. In late January, following the secession of a number of states, North Carolina's legislature voted to hold a special election to determine whether or not to convene a State Convention to consider secession. The subsequent election was hard fought and closely contested. During the debates secessionist A.W. Venable famously suggested that, in event of war between north and south, he would "wipe up every drop of blood shed . . . with this handkerchief of mine." The election resulted in a slight majority opposing the call for a State Convention. Historians have suggested that the Unionist majority was in fact even larger, because some had voted for the Convention in hopes that if held it would vote against secession.

As in other states, the firing on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops radically changed sentiments in North Carolina. Governor John Ellis informed the president that "You can get no troops from North Carolina," and even Unionist and future governor Zeb Vance

reluctantly realized that secession was now inevitable. Ellis ordered the seizure of Federal property in the state, and called for a special meeting of the legislature. Elections were then held for a State Convention, which met in Raleigh on May 20, the anniversary of the Mecklenburg Declaration of 1775 that called for independence from Great Britain. After debates over the procedure to be used to secede, the Convention voted unanimously to rescind North Carolina's ratification of the U.S. Constitution. The delegates then voted to join the Confederacy, and on May 21 North Carolina was proclaimed a Confederate state.

While North Carolinians debated joining the Confederacy, leaders of the new nation were debating whether or not to move their capital. On April 27, following Virginia's secession, the state's Secession Convention had made overtures to the new Confederate government to move its capital from Montgomery, Alabama to Richmond. The economic and political importance of Virginia made it vital to the Confederacy's war effort, but the location of Richmond only 100 miles from Washington would make the new capital exceedingly vulnerable to Federal capture. Nevertheless the Confederate Congress voted to transfer the capital, and Jefferson Davis signed the bill to do so the next day. Plans were quickly made to move the various government offices to Richmond and to convene the next meeting of the congress on July 20, 1861. The decision would make the stretch of Virginia countryside between the two capitals the most fought over terrain in American history for the next four years.

As these events transpired on the east coast, United States and Missouri officials entered into an agreement to maintain the status quo in the state, which had been rocked by violence, particularly in St. Louis. On May 10 and 11, fighting had broken out in the city between the pro-secessionist State Militia and a motley force of pro-Union Home Guard, leaving nearly thirty dead. Ultimately on May 21 an agreement was reached between General Sterling Price of the

State Militia and Union General William Harney in which Price agreed that state officials would maintain order as long as Harney agreed not to introduce Federal troops into St. Louis. While the agreement generally restored order, the future of the state would only be determined by subsequent military operations.