

## **Virginia Secedes**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

For months, as one state after another seceded, the eyes of the nation were on Virginia. Virginia was in a crucial position, both historically and geographically. Because of its proximity to the North, it was in some ways less Southern than many of the states in the Confederacy. It was also known as the birthplace of presidents and Virginians like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were revered by both Northerners and Southerners. Should Virginia secede, it would be a huge blow to the Union cause and a great coup for the Confederacy.

Like other Southern states, Virginia had held a secession convention but unlike the states currently in the Confederacy, Virginia's representatives had voted on April 4, 1861 against seceding by an 80-45 vote. However, the attack and capture of Fort Sumter caused a huge increase in pro-Confederate sentiments in the Old Dominion. The delegates to the secession convention reconvened on April 16 and approved the wording of an ordinance of secession to be put before the people of Virginia the next month. On May 23, 1861, the people of Virginia voted to secede by a vote of 132,000 to 37,000.

The next day, Union troops crossed the Potomac River and occupied Alexandria, Virginia. There was little opposition as the few Virginia militia men present fled at the sight of the Union troops crossing the river. One of the Union soldiers taking control of the town was 24-year-old Elmer Ellsworth, colonel of the 11<sup>th</sup> New York infantry unit. The unit was also called the Fire Zouaves as the men had been recruited by Ellsworth from the fire departments of

New York City and dressed in the same gaudy uniforms as the French Zouave soldiers in Algeria.

Upon entering the town, Ellsworth ordered some of his men to take control of the railroad station while he accompanied others who would take possession of the telegraph office. While walking to the telegraph office, Ellsworth and his men noticed a large Confederate flag flying near the top of the Marshall House, an inn on King Street. Accompanied by Edward House, a New York *Tribune* reporter, and several soldiers, Ellsworth entered the inn and climbed the stairs to the offending room. He leaned out the window and cut the flag down and gathered it up.

As Ellsworth, House and the soldiers began to descend the stairs, they were met on the third floor landing by the innkeeper James Jackson. Jackson was holding a double-barreled shotgun and raised the gun to fire. Corporal Francis Brownell was in front of Ellsworth and attempted to bat the shotgun aside. Jackson fired, striking Ellsworth. Jackson and Brownell then fired at each other. Jackson missed, but Brownell struck Jackson, killing him.

Brownell, House and the other soldiers then gathered around Ellsworth, who was also dying from a shotgun blast to the chest. As it turns out, Ellsworth had spent much of his early life in Illinois and had been a personal family friend of Abraham Lincoln. Upon hearing news of Ellsworth's death, Lincoln burst into tears. On the next day, May 25, Lincoln ordered Ellsworth's body to lie in state in the White House. Ellsworth's death had a tremendous effect on the people of the North, as he became a cult-like martyr. Songs and poems extolling his courage and patriotism were written by the dozens and parents named their newborns after him. His body was moved from Washington to New York City, where thousands came to mourn his

remains at City Hall. He was then buried in a cemetery in his hometown of Mechanicsville, New York.