

West Virginia Breaks Away, Professor Lowe Goes Aloft **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

The most western and northwestern parts of Virginia had little in common with their fellow statesmen from other sections of the Commonwealth. Western regions were rugged and mountainous and not conducive to the sort of agriculture so predominant in flatter and warmer regions of Virginia. Thus, few residents in Western Virginia were slaveholders and they tended to share beliefs with their neighbors in western Maryland and Pennsylvania and Ohio and Kentucky.

The decision by the state government to pull away from the Union caused great consternation in the mountains. These upset citizens ultimately hosted the Wheeling Convention, a meeting in the city of Wheeling of representatives from twenty-seven western Virginia counties. The group first met from May 14 to May 16, 1861 and while some wanted immediate action in response to Virginia's Ordinance of Secession, others pointed out that the Ordinance would not go to the Virginia voters for another week. The convention ultimately decided to reconvene on June 11 if Virginians did indeed vote to secede from the Union.

So, on June 11, in response to Virginia's secession vote, the Wheeling Convention met for a second time. Arthur Boreman, elected president of the convention, declared "We are determined to live under a State Government in the United States of America and under the Constitution of the United States." After deliberating for a little over a week, on June 20, 1861, the delegates called for a reorganization of Virginia's government, claiming that the Ordinance of Secession had vacated all offices of the previous government. The elected Francis Pierpoint

to be governor of what they called The Restored Government of Virginia. The Confederates would not accept the secession of western Virginia without a fight and that fight would come later in the summer. Taking command of Union forces in the area would be Major General George B. McClellan. His adversary on the Confederate side would Robert E. Lee.

During this same week, there was an interesting sidelight to the war. A number of hot air balloonists were trying to convince the United States Army of the military utility of these aircraft. By the time of the Civil War, hot air ballooning, though less than a century old, had become relatively commonplace. However, balloons had seen little use in any military sense. In June 1861, four men were at work on various balloons to demonstrate for U.S. commanders. James Allen, John Wise, John LaMountain and Thaddeus Lowe each had plans for balloons that could be used for surveillance of the enemy.

Lowe was the first to make his mark. On June 19, he ascended on a tethered balloon from the White House lawn and then used another relatively new technology, the telegraph, to wire a message to President Lincoln on the ground below. There was great excitement in the press about the possibilities of this type of reconnaissance.

By June 23, Lowe's equipment had been moved to Falls Church, in northern Virginia. Making several ascents from that point, Lowe was able to observe Confederate troop positions, take an officer up to make a map of the region and make a successful telegraph connection to Irwin McDowell's headquarters in Arlington. These early examples of aerial reconnaissance were promising and would lead to the creation of a balloon corps later in the war.

Also during this same week, on June 24 President Lincoln showed his interest in emerging technologies by watching demonstrations of rifled cannons and the Coffee Mill, an early rapid-firing weapon.