

# Virginia Secedes from the Union

## Notes for the Teacher

In April of 1861, Virginia voted to secede from the United States of America. The secession resolution was introduced to the Virginia State Convention, 1861 by William Ballard Preston of Montgomery County. Following are several primary source documents<sup>1</sup> relating to the topic. They include these:

- a biographical sketch of William Ballard Preston;
- map of Virginia with county boundaries as they existed in 1860;
- a list of the members of the secession convention;
- a copy of a January, 1861 letter from Robert E. Lee to his son in which he states that "secession is nothing but Revolution;"
- a copy of the ordinance of secession; and
- a copy of Preston's handwritten resolution.

While the primary source materials can be used in many ways, suggested activities appropriate for fifth graders follow.

### Letter from Robert E. Lee to his Son

The letter from Robert E. Lee to his son is lengthy and contains much information. It may be well to focus on the first and last paragraphs. Begin by having students talk about what they know about Robert E. Lee. What kind of man do they think he is? What information about Lee do they have that leads them to believe this way?

After the initial discussion, pass out copies of the letter from Robert E. Lee to his son. Read the first paragraph of the letter aloud. [Note: In the first sentence Lee uses the colloquialism, "4<sup>th</sup> inst:" which means the fourth day of the month.] Ask

students to cite Lee's own words from the first paragraph that give clues to the kind of man he is.

In paragraph three, Lee states, "As I wrote you I had intended to purchase Virga (Virginia) State bonds. As far as I can now judge I have strong apprehensions that Virga will secede as it is fashionably termed. In which case she will have largely to increase her debt now large, which will depreciate her bonds very much, & possibly render them valueless." Discuss with students Lee's prediction for Virginia's economy if secession occurs. Continue with the third paragraph by reading aloud and discussing Lee's decision as to what to do about the bond purchase.

Read and discuss the last paragraph. Remind students that the letter was written four months prior to Virginia seceding. Have students verbalize how Lee is feeling about both Virginia and the impending secession. Have students explain what Lee means when he says, "If the Union is dissolved & the government disrupted, I shall return to my native State & share the miseries of my people & save (except) in her defence will draw my sword or none." Was Lee true to his word? Is this the decision he finally made?

### Biographical Sketch of William Ballard Preston

Begin by asking students what they know about Smithfield Plantation, located on the Virginia Tech campus, in Montgomery County. (Students will have learned about Smithfield Plantation in fourth grade and may have visited there.) Have students talk about what they remember about Smithfield and the Preston family. Be sure students understand that the Preston family was powerful and influential in Virginia politics. Introduce the students to William Ballard Preston who was born at Smithfield in 1805. Then, distribute copies of the biographical sketch. Focus on one paragraph at a time, allowing students time to read and discuss each one. The following questions can be used to guide the discussion:

1. The first paragraph provides information about Preston's early life. There are many clues in this paragraph alluding to his family's wealth. What are they?
2. During what years did Preston serve in the United States House of Representatives? What party did he represent? Who is our representative today and in which party is he a member? (Frederick Boucher, Democrat)
3. How else did Preston serve his country? His state?
4. If you had been a member of the committee that went to Washington to interview President Lincoln about his intentions concerning Federal forts in Confederate territory, what questions would you have asked?
5. Why did Preston change his position on secession? He was first a Unionist and voted against secession on April 4<sup>th</sup>. However, on April 16, 1861, he introduced the ordinance of secession which was adopted the next day.

<sup>1</sup>Provided by William Obrochta of the Virginia Historical Society

William Ballard Preston's Handwritten *Secession Resolution and An Ordinance*

Distribute copies of Preston's resolution and *An Ordinance* which was the official document that resulted. How are they alike? Different? Are any of Preston's words or beliefs evident in the official document?

Members of the Virginia State Convention, 1861

This document was donated to the historical society by a man named Leake, a descendant of Walter D. Leake of Goochland, one of the members listed in the document. It is assumed that this copy was made from Delegate Leake's own on which he recorded the votes for and against Virginia secession. Next to each delegates name, Leake apparently recorded an "O" if the person voted for secession and an "X" if he voted against it. At the very top, Leake penned, "Vote announced 19 minutes past 4. April 17."

Create and post a large map of Virginia in 1860 that clearly shows counties. (Remember that West Virginia was part of Virginia at this time.) Divide students into small groups and divvy up the list of delegates, giving each group twenty or so. Provide students with large dots of two different colors. Have each group take turns coming to the large map to post stickers on their counties illustrating whether or not the delegate from that location voted for or against secession. [Note: While groups are posting their stickers, the rest of the class can be reading silently.] After the map is complete, focus on both the big picture and small details. Allow students to take turns making true statements about what the map shows. Be sure students comment on which areas of the state voted for and against secession.