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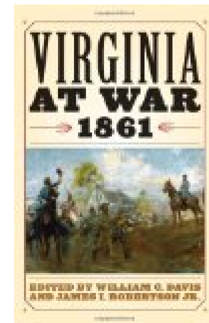
William C. Davis, James I. Robertson Jr.., eds. *Virginia at War, 1861.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. x + 296 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2372-1.



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Crossroads of Secession and Civil War: The Old Dominion, 1861

In December 1860 South Carolina was the first to strike the bell of secession, tolling the imminent departure of seven states from the Union. A provisional government was quickly established in Montgomery, Alabama. But it was not until April of the following year that the Confederacy became solidified when the Old Dominion joined its ranks. The capital was moved to Virginia, and it would be here, more than anyplace else, that the vortex of civil war would unrelentingly swirl for the next four years.

Touted as the first in what will be a series of five volumes, *Virginia at War, 1861* presents a broad portrait of the political, social, economic and military issues confronting Virginians in this momentous year. Led by editors William C. Davis and James I. Robertson, Jr., six other notable scholars weave a story of an embattled state caught in the crosshairs of history. Would Virginia secede? How would she prepare for the inevitable bloodbath that would shower her landscape? How could her meager finances meet the logistical demands of war? Would her enslaved population remain loyal? These and other questions are probed with great aplomb and perception in this excellent regional history.

In "The Virginia State Convention of 1861," James I. Robertson, Jr. examines the troubled and faltering steps Virginians took in their journey toward secession. Just as three other Southern states equivocated over this grave matter, Virginia was hesitant to exit a union which she had played such a historical role in forging. Robertson deftly explains that the state was both ideologically and regionally divided, with the Tidewater counties advancing the cause of secession and the Piedmont and western reaches of the Old Dominion in opposition. In the earliest stages of debate, both extremes were in a distinct minority; the greatest number of delegates at the state convention adopted a "wait and see" approach to unfolding events in the spring of 1861. And the impetus towards secession was clearly advanced by these events. While advocates of all three positions were at various times eloquent and forceful in their cause, none of them could control the decisions made by the Lincoln administration to stymie the momentum of secession. When the state convention placed limitations and conditions upon the Federal government it inadvertently aided secession fever. The debate came to a precipitous end once Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers in the wake of the firing upon Fort Sumter. Virginians would not tolerate a federal invasion of any sovereign state, especially one that would course through the Old Dominion.

Although the remaining years of the Civil War would come to eclipse the initial year of war in both intensity and loss of life, Craig L. Symonds ("Land Operations in Virginia 1861") takes on the daunting challenge of summarizing military operations in 1861. As expected, the Old Dominion was caught in the vice grip of combat. More than anywhere else, armies would ebb and flow across the Virginia landscape with several locations exchanging hands nearly a dozen times. Symonds identifies the theaters of operation as the far western counties (Allegheny West), the Shenandoah Valley, the Virginia

Peninsula, and the overland route between the opposition capitals. Before the first year of the war came to a close, the far western counties had already fallen to Federal forces under the command of George B. McClellan. While the battles this year, excepting First Manassas, would have to be considered respectable skirmishes in light of what was to come, both sides appreciated the fact that this struggle was likely to be a long and bloody one.

In a well-written and perceptive essay ("Confederate Soldiers in Virginia, 1861"), Joseph T. Glatthaar describes the experiences of southern soldiers fighting the war in Virginia in the early months of action. His analysis of soldier motivation is consistent with myriad studies on Civil War combatants that have found their way into publication over the past two decades. First and foremost, Southerners fought to defend hearth and home. Northern armies had invaded Southern soil and had to be repelled. By year's end the bravado and bluster that had marked soldier vocabulary in the flush of spring 1861 had pretty much evaporated, as the grim realities of fighting and campaigning had taken hold. Glatthaar is particularly strong in his appraisal of the adjustments Southern soldiers had to endure in dealing with the demands of army discipline, the hardships and routine of camp life, and the devastation wrought by disease. Soldiers from rural townships succumbed much more readily to the contagions for which urban dwellers had already acquired some degree of immunity.

John M. Coski, Director of the Library and Research at the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, breaks new ground in his examination of naval preparedness in the Old Dominion ("A Navy Department, Hitherto Unknown to Our State Organization"). Irrespective of the overwhelming Federal domination of the waters, Governor John Letcher and other authorities in Virginia understood that certain naval preparation would be necessary in order to prevent a Northern coup de main of the Confederate capital at Richmond. To wit, available steamships were seized and made into floating batteries or land-based fortifications. Others were rendered as river obstructions. The naval yards at Portsmouth and Norfolk were targeted for immediate seizure. While fleeing Federal forces managed to burn most of the buildings at the Gosport facility, Virginia's militia salvaged a huge cache of ordnance that was quickly put towards the state's defense. Virginia's nascent navy would be served by several notable officers, many of whom had defected from the Federal navy, along with many experienced jack tars. At Norfolk, the state began salvage operations to raise several ships that the Federals had scuttled before their flight. Although the Virginia navy passed on refurbishing the *Merrimack*, the Confederate navy would outfit her with iron plate, and she would go on to serve as the famous *CSS Virginia*. Despite impressive efforts, the challenges facing this fledgling navy–defending a thousand miles of coast line with many navigable rivers penetrating the interior–were such that the best hope was to buy enough time to allow land-based defenses to mature before the Federals arrived in great numbers.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr. investigates the position taken by African Americans in the Old Dominion with respect to secession and civil war ("African-Virginians' Attitudes on Secession and Civil War, 1861"). In a brief, but decidedly insightful essay, Jordan admits the inherent limitations in determining these attitudes at this point in the conflict. What can be deciphered is that they were very cautious about expressing their opinions. They knew something big was transpiring and that their fate was somehow inextricably linked to the outcome. Yet, they tailored their remarks depending upon the person with whom they were speaking. On the other hand, their numbers alone discomfited white Virginians who lived in constant dread of slave insurrection. Even those African Americans who professed their loyalty to their masters, and those who actively courted Northern triumph, took a guarded "wait and see" approach in 1861.

To the casual student of the Civil War, it is generally assumed that the transfer of the Confederate capital from Montgomery to Richmond was a perfunctory matter. In "Richmond Becomes the Capital," William C. Davis contends that only a combination of lobbying, coercion, and timely voting secured this honor. Although the switch of capitals had been a blandishment extended to Virginia in hopes she would join the Confederacy, once she did, it became a very contentious matter. Regional ambitions, criticism of Virginia's reluctance to secede, and concern over the number of unionists in the Old Dominion made the transfer of the capital a less than seamless one. Alexander Stephens ultimately resolved the matter by introducing bloc voting according to state. Moreover, Arkansas' timely entry into the Confederacy bolstered Richmond's bid. With the states evenly divided, Virginian lobbyists worked on a divided Louisiana delegation. When one of the anti-Richmond delegates returned to Louisiana, and another was persuaded to switch his vote, Richmond's selection was finally secured.

If Tidewater Virginia was a nest of secession and the trans-Allegheny region a host of unionism, then, the

Shenandoah Valley, nestled between these two sections, was an area decidedly more divided over the great issues of 1861. Echoing Robertson's examination of the secession convention, Michael Mahon ("The Shenandoah Valley of Virginia") suggests that unionist sentiment was ultimately hamstrung by the progress of events outside of its control. When the Lincoln administration took steps to halt the march of secession, loyal sentiments eroded in the Valley. Sensing the inevitability of secession and war, Valley residents embraced the Confederacy and prepared for the conflict. Given its proximity to Union territory, and its intrinsic strategic value, it surprised no one that the Valley would become the scene of some of the earliest action of the war. Those merchants and farmers whose wares and produce could aid the war effort experienced boom times in 1861. Others quickly discovered the advent of hard times. In any event, a major transformation had taken place. Peace and prosperity had given way to fear and uncertainty.

C. Stuart McGehee's "The Tarnished Thirty-fifth Star," claims that the emergence of West Virginia's statehood during the Civil War is both intriguing and controversial. The western counties of the Old Dominion were of vital import to the Union, particularly so, because the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad traversed the area. In one of the quickest campaigns of the Civil War, Federal forces secured this region as early as September 1861. A self-appointed band of unionist leaders adopted a new constitution and immediately advanced the cause of independent statehood. The Lincoln administration was equally fast in hurdling whatever constitutional obstacles to recognizing West Virginia's bid existed. Thus, the Mountaineer State was declared on December 31, 1862. The victory of Republican state-makers was short-lived, however, when in the 1870s Democratic majorities swept them out of office. The state capital was moved from Wheeling to Charleston and the Democrats initiated a wholesale repudiation of the Republican legacy. The streets and statuary of the capital, Charleston, celebrates the memory of Confederate heroes.

James I. Robertson, Jr. concludes this volume by presenting an edited version of Judith Brockenbrough McGuire's diary. Every bit as fascinating as Mary Chesnut's reflections, McGuire's recollections will be consecutively employed in subsequent volumes as a barometer of the personal experience of a displaced Virginian who would spend much of the war on the move throughout the Old Dominion. Robertson has expertly edited this installment, shedding valuable light on person and events that have hitherto been obscure.

All in all, this regional study of Virginia's experience of the Civil War in 1861 is a great success. Conceptually brilliant, much of it is fresh and engaging. All of the essayists have crafted interesting, well-written, and highly digestible studies of how the outbreak of civil war changed nearly everything Virginias had known before 1861. And it was just the beginning of change.

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