

# Slavery and Secession in Tennessee

*Essential Question: Why was Tennessee divided on the question of secession and how did that division affect Tennessee during the Civil War?*

As the turbulent 1850s drew to a close, Tennesseans found themselves divided over the question of slavery. Fertile soil and flat land made large plantations possible in West Tennessee, so the population was largely pro-slavery. West Tennessee was tied to the Deep South states not only through their shared interest in cotton, but also in their dependence on the Mississippi River as a transportation route. By contrast, in East Tennessee where rocky soil and mountains made large scale farming difficult, there were few enslaved people and less interest in expanding slavery. In Middle Tennessee enslaved people labored on tobacco plantations as well as smaller farms that produced food destined to feed enslaved populations in the Deep South.

The presidential election of 1860 was a turning point for the nation and for Tennessee. The Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln who vowed not to interfere with slavery where it already existed, but also to stop slavery from spreading in the West.<sup>1</sup> The Democratic Party could not decide on a candidate and split. Stephen Douglas, the Northern Democratic candidate, favored popular sovereignty. This policy allowed the question of slavery to be decided by voters in the territories. The Southern Democratic candidate, John Breckinridge, campaigned in favor of supporting the *Dred Scott* decision which stated that Congress had no power to ban slavery in the territories.<sup>2</sup> The compromise candidate from the new Constitutional Union Party was John Bell, a

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Appleby et al., *The American Journey*. (Columbus, Ohio: Glencoe McGraw Hill, 2003), 450.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Tennessean, who campaigned in favor of keeping the Union and slavery as they were. Bell received 48% of the votes in Tennessee. Breckinridge received 45%, Douglas 8%, and Lincoln none because his name did not appear on the Tennessee ballot.<sup>3</sup>

Lincoln's election led South Carolina to secede in December 1860 followed by Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Georgia. Leaders in these states believed that Lincoln would abolish slavery despite his promises and were angry that voters in the North and West had the power to elect a candidate who did not receive any electoral votes in the South. Tennessee governor Isham Harris, a West Tennessee native, shared these views, but knew that many Tennesseans still opposed secession. Harris carefully maneuvered the state towards secession by asking the state legislature to authorize a vote on the subject on February 9, 1861.<sup>4</sup> Secessionists and Unionists campaigned throughout the state. A state convention on secession was rejected by 55% of voters. Voters had also been asked to select delegates to attend if the convention were held. More than 75% of the delegates selected were Unionists.<sup>5</sup>

However, Tennesseans' support of the Union was conditional. Many Tennesseans believed that states did have a right to secede and that the Union should not interfere with secession. Between February 1861 and June 1861 a number of events occurred that caused many Tennesseans to shift their support to the Confederacy.<sup>6</sup> First, Lincoln decided to resupply the troops at Fort Sumter. This led the Confederacy to attack the fort on April 12, 1861. Just three days after the battle. Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 state militia troops to suppress the rebellion. He appealed "to all loyal citizens to favor, facilitate, and

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 133.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-136.

aid this effort to maintain the honor, the integrity, and the existence of our National Union.”<sup>7</sup> This was the final straw for most of the conditional Unionists. They agreed with Governor Harris when he said that “Tennessee will not furnish a single man for the purposes of coercion, but fifty thousand, if necessary for defense of our rights.”<sup>8</sup>

When a second vote on secession was held on June 8, 1861, 69 percent of voters favored secession. Tennessee formally joined the Confederacy on July 2, 1861. However, Tennessee’s secession did not end the struggle between Unionists and Secessionists. East Tennesseans had overwhelmingly voted against secession in February and June. Under the leadership of Andrew Johnson, William G “Parson” Brownlow and others, plans were made for East Tennessee to secede from Tennessee and form a new Union state.<sup>9</sup> Governor Harris believed that East Tennessee would eventually come to support secession and allowed the Unionists considerable freedom to dissent until early November. Unionists plotted with Union generals in Kentucky to burn key railroad bridges along the East Tennessee & Virginia and East Tennessee & Georgia railroads prior to a Union invasion. The goal was to weaken the Confederacy by cutting Virginia off from the Confederate states of the Deep South. The invasion did not happen, but five bridges were burned, which led to a crackdown by Confederate forces and an end to any hopes of East Tennessee becoming a separate state.<sup>10</sup> However, Tennesseans continued to fight for the Union as soldiers, home guards, partisans and bushwhackers throughout the war. Hurst

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<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, Abraham, Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 1. General Correspondence. 1833 to 1916: Abraham Lincoln, Monday, Proclamation on State Militia. 1861. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal0907400/>. Accessed 22 June 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Isham Harris, “Message to Simon Cameron, April 15, 1861. *Messages of the Governors of Tennessee*, Vol. 5., pp. 272-273. Civil War Sourcebook, <http://www.tnsos.net/TSLA/cwsourcebook/index.php> Accessed 9 July, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Bergeron, Ash and Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Kelly, "[The Bridge Burnings and Union Uprising of 1861.](#)" *Tennessee Ancestors* 21, no. 2 (August 2005):123-129.

Nation and the Free and Independent State of Scott represented attempts by Unionists to separate themselves from Confederate Tennessee.

Generally speaking, most Unionists lived in Eastern Tennessee, but pockets of Unionists could also be found in western Tennessee along the Tennessee River. In McNairy County, people living in the southern part of the county tended to support secession, while those in the northern half opposed it.<sup>11</sup> The leading Unionist was Fielding Hurst. Hurst was an enslaver and large landowner in McNairy County. Hurst was imprisoned in Nashville for publicly speaking out against secession. Once released, he was made a colonel by Andrew Johnson and raised the 6th Tennessee cavalry.<sup>12</sup> The land controlled by Hurst and his Unionist followers came to be called Hurst Nation. The division in the county led to brutal warfare between its residents. Many homes on both sides were looted and burned during the war years.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in East Tennessee, residents of Scott County were strongly Unionist. On June 4, 1861 Senator Andrew Johnson gave a speech at the courthouse in Huntsville, the county seat, in which he condemned secession.<sup>14</sup> The residents of Scott County voted against secession by the highest margin of any Tennessee county. However, their efforts could not stop Tennessee from seceding. The residents of Scott County responded by seceding from Tennessee and declaring themselves to be the “Free and Independent State of Scott.” Tennessee did not recognize Scott County’s independence. As in McNairy County, Scott County experienced guerilla warfare throughout the war years.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bill Wagoner, “McNairy County.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. 2018.  
<https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/mcnairy-county/> Accessed 9 July, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

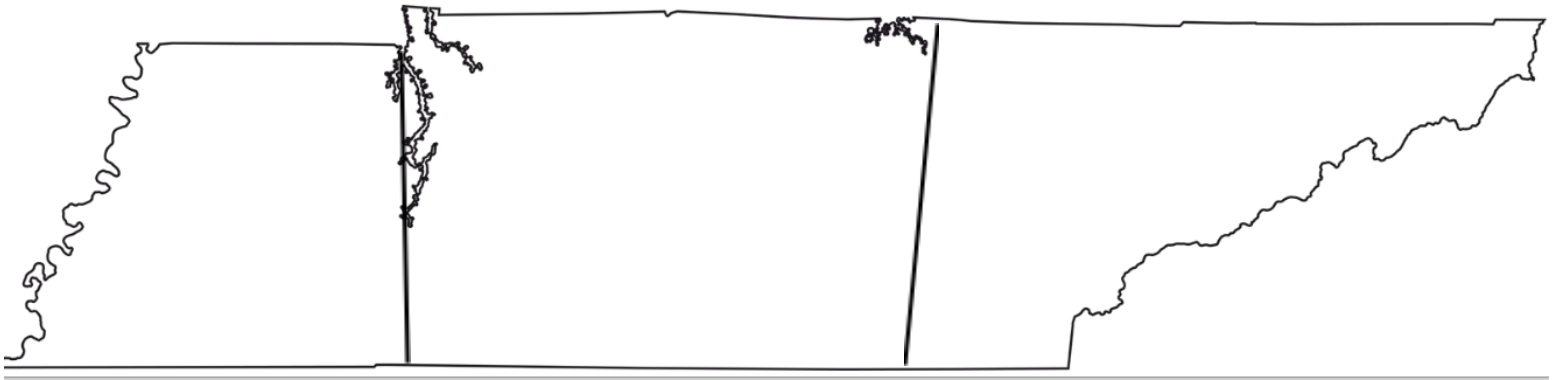
<sup>14</sup> Margaret D. Binnicker, “Scott County.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. 2018.  
<https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/scott-county/> Accessed 9 July, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

The Free and Independent State of Scott and the less formally organized Hurst Nation both represented attempts to fight secession and remain true to the Union. Consciously or not, both communities drew on Watauga and the State of Franklin as examples of communities formed by and for the people they represented. Both communities endured years of brutal guerilla warfare as they sought to uphold their Unionist beliefs. Like many communities in Tennessee, Hurst Nation and the State of Scott faced challenges in forgetting the horrors of guerilla warfare as they rebuilt after the war.

# Slavery and Secession *Complete each section of the graphic organizer below.*

## Part I: Why was Tennessee divided on slavery and secession?



*Label the map above using the phrases in the word bank box.*

**East Tennessee   Middle Tennessee   West Tennessee   Pro-slavery, Pro-slavery, Neutral on slavery,  
Flat land and fertile soil,   Rocky soil,   fertile soil, pro-secession, pro-Union, pro-secession**

## Part II: What events occurred between February, 1861 and June, 1861 that changed many Tennesseans' minds about secession?

February 9, 1861

Voters reject  
state convention  
on secession

April 12, 1861

June 8, 1861

Voters accept  
Tennessee's  
secession

*Use the text to fill the missing events on the timeline*

**Part III: How did unionists continue to resist secession after June 8, 1861?**

Hurst Nation	State of Scott	Bridge Burners
Who?	Who?	Who?
Where?	Where?	Where?
What?	What?	What?
Why?	Why?	Why?

Use the information in your graphic organizer to write an essay that answers the following question:

**Why was Tennessee divided on the question of secession and how did that division affect Tennessee during the Civil War?**