“Learn your wives and daughters how to use the gun and pistol”:
The Secession Crisis in Montgomery County, Virginia

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By the summer of 1860, the long-simmering disputes about slavery in the United States were rapidly coming to a boil. White Americans had disagreed about slavery almost since the institution first appeared during the seventeenth century, but the late 1850s brought a series of events that widened and deepened those disagreements. Bloodshed in Kansas, the Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, and John Brown’s raid on the armory at Harpers Ferry in late 1859 had successively raised the level of suspicion, anger, and fear throughout the United States. To many Americans that summer, it seemed the crisis had reached a tipping point: if they could not settle the issue of slavery once and for all, then they should part company and establish new nations that could.

This debate was just as heated in Montgomery County, Virginia as it was elsewhere. There, too, arguments grew more intense during the 1850s, and by summer 1860 the air crackled with tension. Little of this tension has appeared in earlier histories, though. Not surprisingly, those that focus on the secession crisis at the national or state level rarely mention Montgomery County because it was relatively small, remote from the centers of power, and seldom the scene of dramatic events. Histories of the county itself, though, are seldom better. They too frequently tell the story through elements of the larger story and fail to capture the secession crisis as it unfolded *in the county.*

This article seeks to provide a fuller and more intimate picture of the secession crisis in Montgomery County. Newspapers, private papers, and public records all contain elements of the story, and taken together they show clearly that the story in Montgomery County was just as complex and the tensions just as great as they were anywhere else. They also show that in Montgomery County, as elsewhere, the issue of slavery lay at the heart of the crisis.

Slavery was alive and well in Montgomery County in 1860; in fact it was expanding rapidly. Slavery had *existed* in the county since its creation in 1776, but for many years it remained a relatively insignificant element of the local economy and society. The land and climate of Montgomery County
were well suited to a variety of agricultural pursuits. Bottomland along the North and South Forks of the Roanoke River, in the east, and along the Little and New Rivers, in the west, was ideal for tobacco, wheat, or a variety of other field crops. Elsewhere in the county, all but the roughest mountain terrain was useful for raising cattle, sheep, or pigs. Producing marketable goods, then, was never a problem in Montgomery County; getting them to market was, though. None of the county’s waterways led to market, and while turnpikes in the county, especially the Alleghany and Southwestern Turnpikes, were quite good by the standards of the day, land transportation was still too expensive to move bulky products such as wheat, tobacco, or wool to market profitably. That changed when the railroad arrived.

Advocates of internal improvement had tried for years to establish a railroad through Southwest Virginia. Hopes rose again in 1849, when the General Assembly granted a charter to the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. This time, finally, the hopes were realized. Ground was broken at Lynchburg in 1850, and over the next six years crews worked from east and west to construct a 200-mile-long link between Lynchburg and Bristol. Montgomery County residents did not have to wait for the line’s completion, for it reached Christiansburg in April 1854, and that was enough to link the county to the world. The Virginia and Tennessee Railroad connected Christiansburg directly to Lynchburg, and from there other railroads and the James River and Kanawha Canal led onward to Richmond, Baltimore, and beyond.²

Completion of the rail link provided vast new markets for crops and products from Montgomery County, and agricultural production soared. Between 1850 and 1860 wheat production in the county tripled and that of tobacco rose fifteen-fold (1,582 percent). New markets also appeared for millstones, coal, and wood, which the railroad itself needed for ties and to fuel its locomotives. None of this required slave labor, but slaves were widely available from eastern Virginia, where planters had more workers than they needed, and for those who could afford them, buying slaves brought down even further the cost of producing a variety of marketable goods. As a result, the number of slaves in Montgomery County also rose dramatically between 1850 and 1860, from 1,471 on the 1850 census to 2,219 a decade later.³

Just as the debates over slavery were heating up, then, slavery was becoming an increasingly prominent part of life in Montgomery County. By 1860, slaves comprised 21 percent of the county’s population, and 18 percent of the free households in the county owned at least one slave. Neither of these figures can compare with those found farther east, and they are slightly below statewide averages, but they were well above the
overall rates found in Southwest Virginia. It is also important to note that most of these were not individual slaves serving in a domestic capacity. The median slaveholding in Montgomery County was five in 1860, and twenty-two county residents qualified as “planters,” meaning they each owned at least twenty slaves. Indeed, a substantial majority of the slaves in Montgomery County (66.4 percent) lived on farms with at least ten slaves, and a full third of the total slave population lived on the farms of those twenty-two planters.  

Montgomery County in 1860 may not have been part of the Black Belt, but it was certainly a slave society, and that was clearly evident during the secession crisis of 1860–1861. White residents of the county were not as radical as their counterparts in many other parts of Virginia or the South, but their concerns about slavery and “Southern Rights” were certainly clear in their comments and actions during the presidential campaign that year. The election of 1860 was one of the most divisive in American history, and the division began with the selection of candidates. Democrats found themselves unable to field a candidate acceptable to both the northern and southern wings of the party. They tried first at Charleston, South Carolina, in April. Delegates deadlocked, however, over the question of slavery. Many southern Democrats wanted the party platform to call explicitly for federal legislation to protect slavery in the territories. Most northern Democrats, however, feared that such a call would destroy the party’s chances in a national election and pushed, instead, for a platform endorsing the idea of popular sovereignty. By a narrow margin, the northern view prevailed, which led a significant number of southern delegates to march out of the convention in protest. Even with them gone, the remaining delegates were unable to agree on a candidate, and after fifty-seven ballots they agreed to adjourn for six weeks and try again in Baltimore.  

When the Democrats reconvened, they had no better luck. Northern and southern wings of the party remained at odds over the issue of slavery. This time, unable even to agree on which delegates to seat, the Democrats split before their convention even opened. They then proceeded to hold two conventions and to nominate two candidates. Northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas and adopted a platform calling on all citizens to accept the Supreme Court’s view of “the measure of restriction, whatever it may be, imposed by the Federal Constitution on the power of the Territorial Legislature over the subject of the domestic relations.” Southern Democrats, meanwhile, nominated John C. Breckinridge and drafted a platform that stated explicitly “it is the duty of the Federal Government, in all its departments, to protect, when necessary, the rights of persons and
property in the Territories, and wherever else its Constitutional authority extends.” This platform never mentioned slavery by name, but in the coded language of the day, defending “the rights of persons and property” made Breckinridge the avowedly pro-slavery candidate in the race.6

Democrats in Montgomery County responded with enthusiasm to the events in Baltimore. In early August, a meeting of the party’s county branch endorsed the action of Virginia delegates who walked out of the convention and declared: “[W]e hail with satisfaction the nomination ... of Breckinridge.” Later that month the leading paper in the county, the Star & Herald, went so far as to change its name and rededicate itself to the support of Breckinridge and his pro-slavery platform. Joseph McMurran and Jonathan C. Wade, publishers of the Star & Herald, announced that the paper was being replaced by The New Star. They and the new paper, its publishers declared, “will be devoted to the principles and interests of the Democratic party, as the advocates and defenders of equal rights among the States and will be identified with the South in all its political actions.”7

Montgomery County was not solidly behind Breckinridge, though. Like many other Virginians, some of the county’s residents preferred a more moderate approach. While the Democrats had regrouped between their Charleston and Baltimore conventions, a group of conservatives—mainly former Whigs—met and established the Constitutional Union Party. The new party announced that, because party platforms “have had the effect to mislead and deceive the people, and ... to widen the political divisions of the country, by the creation and encouragement of geographical and sectional parties,” it would not offer one. Rather, its members pledged, simply, to protect and defend “no political principle other than THE CONSTITUTION OF THE COUNTRY, THE UNION OF THE STATES, AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF THE LAWS.” They then nominated John Bell, a Tennessee plantation owner, to be their candidate in the presidential election. When the Democrats split, Montgomery County residents who found Breckinridge too aggressive and Douglas too weak gravitated toward Bell as an alternative who supported both slavery and the Union. It is unclear exactly when the Constitutional Union Party first appeared in the county, but The New Star announced on August 25 that members of the party would meet in Christiansburg on the first Monday of September.8

This set the stage for the presidential campaign in Montgomery County. Neither Stephen Douglas nor Abraham Lincoln was ever a serious contender there. As it was elsewhere in Virginia and the Upper South, the campaign in Montgomery County was between Breckinridge and Bell. Lincoln and the Republicans were a perfect foil for Democrats in Montgomery County,
though, as *The New Star* repeatedly and vividly demonstrated. Throughout September and October, the paper largely ignored Bell and filled its pages with pro-Breckinridge campaign speeches and reports of “abolitionist” conspiracies or slave “insurrections” across the South. Lest anyone miss its point, the paper’s editors spelled it out unequivocally in their issue on November 3, the last before the election:

Do Not Forget: If Lincoln is elected the South will have had her last President and hereafter we will be the “Hewers of Wood and drawers of water” of the Black Republicans as long as the Union shall last.... They will never hesitate until they carry out their avowed purpose of destroying the slave property of the South, and making the slave equal in rights with the white—“Equality of Races” is their motto. The horrors of amalgamation is openly proclaimed by that party & where they will stop, who can tell?

Voters in Montgomery County, however, were not yet ready to throw down the gauntlet. They did cast 425 votes for Breckinridge, but they cast 712 for Bell (and another 74 for Stephen Douglas). The election showed that Montgomery County, like Virginia, was divided between a significant minority in favor of immediate action and a majority that preferred to wait and see if compromise was possible. This remained the case between November 1860 and April 1861. For five months, residents of the county debated which course to follow, hoped for the best, and prepared for the worst.

*The New Star* spoke out loudly for those who supported Southern Rights. Immediately after the presidential election, the paper began to print glowing accounts of those in the Lower South who called for secession. Later issues approvingly described the departure of South Carolina and other Deep South states from the Union and the formation of the Confederate States. The paper even provided its readers a front-row view of the Confederacy’s defense preparations. Lying as it did on the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad, Christiansburg saw frequent shipments of arms and ammunition heading south during the winter and early spring, and *The New Star* hailed every such shipment and especially noted those originating in Virginia. On February 9, for example, the paper proudly reported that five brass cannon—dubbed “Secession Defenders” by the paper’s editors—had recently passed through town on their way from Richmond’s Tredegar Iron Works to “the republic of Georgia.”

*The New Star* did not speak for everyone in Montgomery County, though. From his home in Blacksburg, Giles D. Thomas also watched developments in the lower South during the winter of 1860–1861, but he
reacted to them very differently. Writing in February to William Hoge, who lived in Bland County, Thomas criticized the “rabid secessionists” of Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas who were willing to leave the Union simply because, they complained, “we have lost so many negroes.” Thomas also chided Hoge for yielding to “the Tory blood” of secessionism rather than “that good old Whig blood which is now developing itself in [the] conduct of so large a majority of citizens of the Old Dominion.” He urged Hoge to “hear that old Whig blood and remain true to your country and bid Satan depart.” Thomas was confident that Congress would find a solution to the crisis and restore “harmony between the different sections,” and when that happened, Thomas predicted, Hoge would quickly change his tune. “In less than one year if anyone should call you a secessionist you will knock him down sooner than if he had said you lied.”

In the midst of this excitement, residents of the county responded to the call for a state convention to decide on a course of action. As they had been in November, county residents were divided. Some were what The New Star dubbed “prompt action men.” These were men such as “W.K.B.” from Childress Store, who supported immediate secession. It was, he wrote in December 1860, “beyond human power to prevent the secession of the Southern States.” Therefore, he concluded, “it becomes us to cease our differences, and unitedly seek out some better and more efficient plan by which to save ourselves, our common interests and institutions from total wreck and destruction.” This remained, however, a minority view. Most of the county’s voters were, in the words of The New Star, “conservatives,” and they ultimately chose a more moderate spokesman, William Ballard Preston, to represent them at the convention when it opened in February.

Preston, a Whig, belonged to one of the county’s wealthiest and most prestigious families. His father, James Patton Preston, had been the state’s governor from 1816 to 1819, and William Ballard, himself, had served in Congress for two years (1847–1849) and as Secretary of the Navy for one (1849–1850) under President Zachary Taylor. Preston was also the third largest slave-owner in the county, with fifty slaves in 1860, but he was not a fire-eater. He was a conditional Unionist who still hoped to preserve both slavery and the Union, and in Richmond he was a leading moderate among members of the state convention.

The convention opened on February 13 with a solid majority of its members opposed to immediate secession. Some were absolute Unionists, opposed to secession under any circumstances, while others, like Preston, were conditional Unionists, willing to remain in the Union as long as southern interests such as slavery were protected. Together they set about fashioning a strategy that
recognized the right of secession and opposed any use of coercion against those who had exercised that right but that also kept Virginians from doing so as long as any other avenues remained viable. Many of the delegates were confident that either Congress or the special Peace Conference meeting in Washington would eventually forge another compromise to end the crisis, and they hoped to delay any unilateral action by Virginia until that happened. Thus they were willing to talk and stall in the hope that a solution would emerge.\footnote{14}

Not surprisingly, The New Star and those it represented in Montgomery County expressed growing frustration at the convention’s reluctance to act decisively. In mid-March the paper reported that the people of Virginia were growing impatient with “the do nothing policy of the patriotic (?) old gentlemen that compose the convention.” To The New Star, this reluctance threatened the Commonwealth’s very survival. It was clear to the paper’s publishers that the Union was dissolving, and if Virginia remained a part of the United States while a majority of the slave states seceded, the Old Dominion would soon be at the mercy of its enemies. “Her capital will be removed and she will be deprived of her best population,” The New Star predicted early in March; “their places will be supplied by the ‘universal yankee nation,’ and Virginia will become a poor mendicant for Black republican favors and protection.” By the end of the month, its editors had grown even more frustrated: “The naked issue now for Virginia to decide, is, whether she will go North or South.”\footnote{15}

Equally frustrating was the county’s refusal to make adequate preparations for the coming storm. The county had, of course, a regiment of the state militia, and after John Brown’s Raid its residents had organized three additional companies: The Montgomery Highlanders, the Montgomery Fencibles, and the Fort Lewis Volunteers. Each of these units trained or marched from time to time in 1860, but shortages of arms threatened their ability to defend the county properly. Thus, early in March 1861, the county court met to consider a special levy by which to raise additional money with which to arm the militia. Charles Ronald, captain of the Montgomery Highlanders, offered “an eloquent and beautiful patriotic address” in support of the proposal. Daniel H. Hoge, on the other hand, spoke at length against the levy and the purchase of additional arms. According to The New Star, Hoge told the court “that they could drive all the ‘yankees’ away, that would ever come among us with hostile intent, by rolling stones down the hills on them.” Whatever Hoge really said that day, he and other moderates prevailed, and the county court determined \textit{for now} not to seek additional money or arms.\footnote{16}

The tone of the debate in Montgomery County changed entirely after April 12 and the commencement of hostilities at Fort Sumter. News of the
attack quickly reached Christiansburg, thanks to the telegraph, and *The New Star* spread the word as rapidly as it could. In its haste, though, the paper added to people's confusion about the exact course of events. The April 13 issue of *The New Star* was printed before word arrived of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, but the editors had apparently concluded that war was inevitable. Thus the paper correctly announced "Civil War Inaugurated," but it did so on the basis of reports that the Union navy planned to resupply Fort Sumter "peaceably if it can be done; forcibly if it must." Initially then many county residents were led to believe that northern aggression had sparked the fighting. Eventually, the mistake was corrected. The April 20 issue also declared "Civil War Inaugurated," but this time it provided full details of the battle and the surrender of the fort and its garrison.17

By April 20, though, Fort Sumter was old news because by then the state convention had finally acted. After weeks of inconclusive debate, members of the convention (including William Ballard Preston) had decided on April 4 against drafting an ordinance of secession and submitting it to the voters for ratification. Instead, on April 8, they voted to send three representatives, including Preston, to meet President Lincoln and hear directly from him what his intentions were. Preston and his companions left for Washington the next day but were delayed en route and did not reach the city until April 12. The next day they met with Lincoln, who simply repeated what he had said at his inauguration about maintaining federal authority in the South, and the disappointed Virginians returned to Richmond.18

There they found that the convention had suspended its deliberations when word arrived of the attack on Fort Sumter. President Lincoln, however, had then called on the states—including Virginia—to provide 75,000 volunteers to "suppress" those challenging federal authority and "to repossess the forts, places, and property" they had seized. Lincoln was careful to avoid the words rebellion, insurrection, or civil war, but the truth was clear to see. The convention reconvened in secret session on April 16, and by then, many of its moderate members had concluded that because Virginians would now have to fight, they should fight on the side of the Confederacy. Among those who made this change was William Ballard Preston. Preston himself introduced the ordinance of secession, and he was among those who voted for it. On April 17, 1861, by a vote of 88 to 55, the convention elected to secede, conditional upon the approval of voters in a general referendum to be held in May.19

Once the decision to secede was made, residents of Montgomery County rallied to the cause—at least in public. In Central Depot, today’s Radford, patriotic citizens acquired or made a Confederate flag and earned the honor, according to *The New Star*, "of giving to the breeze the first
Confederate flag publicly displayed in this county.” Meanwhile volunteer companies went on high alert and began making preparations “to resist the march of Lincoln’s troops.” They had barely begun to prepare when it was time to go; *The New Star* reported on April 27 that the volunteers had departed for Richmond aboard a special train on the evening of April 24. It is fitting that the paper’s own editors, who had spent the past five months calling for action, were among the troops heading east “to engage in the defence of the State against Lincoln’s mercenary hordes from the North.”

Before the volunteers left, many joined their neighbors in a public demonstration of the county’s commitment to the Confederate cause. Shortly after the state convention had voted to leave the Union, a number of citizens met at the courthouse in Christiansburg and called for their fellows to convene there on April 22 “to give an expression of their sentiments on the state of the country and to give assurance of their loyalty to Virginia and the whole South.” It was later described as “the largest assemblage of the citizens of Montgomery County ever witnessed,” and its focus quickly turned to defense. This time, apparently, no one objected to raising extra money and using it to buy arms. In fact, those in attendance raised $10,000 on the spot and named several of their number a committee to go to Richmond and purchase up to $5,000 in arms for the county’s use. And knowing that many of the county’s men were about to leave for the front, the citizens meeting in Christiansburg also called for the creation of a new “mounted police” to better protect themselves and their families.

County residents had long maintained patrols in each of the county’s five districts to monitor the comings and goings of slaves. Members of the patrol kept an eye out for slaves on the county’s roads and stopped those they encountered to ensure they had their master’s permission to be out. Before the attack on Fort Sumter, these patrols had been fairly small—six or seven men and a captain for each district—and they seem not to have drilled or adopted much of a military nature beyond identifying a captain in each district. At its May meeting, the county court first enlarged the patrols to about twenty men per district but did not change their basic nature; they remained more a *posse comitatus* than a paramilitary organization. Later in the term, though, the justices took official notice of April’s public meeting and responded to its call for a new mounted police force. The court initially called for a force of approximately 100 men among the five districts but soon raised the number to 30 per district. It also organized the new force much more formally than the patrol had been. Andrew Lucas was appointed “Chief of Police” for the county, and the men in each district were to elect a commander and two lieutenants to serve under Lucas’s “control,
direction, and management.” And unlike members of the patrol, members of the mounted police were required to meet monthly in Christiansburg and weekly in their respective districts “for drill and general business.”

Enlarging the patrol and creating the mounted police reflected the growing attention to public safety that was evident in Montgomery County during the secession crisis. James J. Henning, writing from Lafayette in May, declared: “Every thing here is being reduced to system in a military point of view.” He went on to describe “home guards mounted & armed, dashing around, Patroll moving, the remnant of Malitia being required to meet & drill weekly & youths & boys forming into companies, to drill & prepare for service.” The county was preparing, Henning concluded: “every thing excited to the highest pitch is moving in the defence of our country and our homes.” Throughout the county residents were responding to what they considered a growing number of threats, both internal and external, and having dispatched their volunteer companies to meet the external threat, they turned much of their attention to internal threats, starting with their own slaves.

Long before the attack on Fort Sumter, whites in the county had worried about the impact on their slaves of the heated political debates going on around them. During the fall campaign, The New Star had reported “insurrection Excitement” among slaves in Mississippi and Georgia, and almost immediately after the election, it described growing unrest among slaves in Virginia. Its November 24 issue, for example, included a story from Lancaster County of slaves “making sundry assumptions of freedom ‘now that massa Lincoln was elected.’” By early May, such “assumptions” were also becoming evident in Montgomery County. Mary Elizabeth Caperton, who was staying at White Thorn with the family of James F. Preston, reported that one slave, known as “Uncle Davy,” had allegedly made a pro-Lincoln speech to “his brethren in Blacksburg.” According to Caperton, Davy had told the assembled slaves “that Lincoln was a second Christ and that all that the white people said about Lincoln was a lie from beginning to end.” Not surprisingly, Caperton declared there was “uneasiness in the county about the negros.”

Enlarging the patrol and establishing the mounted police were, perhaps, the most visible steps taken to address the danger posed by slaves in the county, but they were not the only ones. Individual owners responded too. Uncle Davy, for example, was married to a woman enslaved by James and Sarah Preston and was the father of “their head man.” When Mrs. Preston learned of Uncle Davy’s pro-Lincoln speech, she told Mary Elizabeth Caperton that “she would send for him and ask him if he had made this speech and if so he should never come on her place again.” A “Mr. Hoge,” who lived east of Blacksburg, reportedly went even farther
and confined four or five of his slaves for unspecified threatening behavior. Initially, however, many whites in the county seem to have believed they could trust their slaves with their lives. *The New Star* reported in early May that white Methodists in the county had spoken to black members of their congregation about “the events now transpiring in the county,” and the paper encouraged other “judicious persons” to follow the Methodists’ example. “Our servants will be true to their masters,” declared *the New Star* confidently, “and will fight for them if necessary.”

White residents of Montgomery County initially demonstrated similarly mixed reactions to the free blacks living in their midst. According to the 1860 census, 147 free blacks resided in the county. Over a quarter of these were in Christiansburg, but free blacks could be found throughout the county during the secession crisis. White Virginians had long considered free blacks a threat to the institution of slavery. As a result, during the half century before the Civil War the state legislature had enacted a series of laws designed to reduce the number of free blacks in Virginia and restrict the freedoms of those who remained. It is not at all clear how vigorously these laws were actually enforced. Many of the free black families living in Montgomery County had been there for decades, and in many ways they were accepted members of the community. They were certainly not considered by whites to be equal members of the community, but they were accepted as members.

But as racial fears rose with the election of Lincoln and the “Black Republicans,” so too did concern about the potential danger posed by free blacks. As it often did, *The New Star* spoke for the county’s “prompt action men,” suggesting that free blacks should leave the county before they were driven out. In February 1861, the paper noted that the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad was offering free passage in order to facilitate “the emigration of free negroes.” This was, the paper declared, “a good opportunity for free negroes to go to free States, and the sooner they embrace it, the better it will be for them. They will not be permitted to remain here much longer.”

In fact, there is no evidence of any actual crackdown on the free black population in Montgomery County during the secession crisis. It is impossible to be certain of this because so little evidence has survived of how individual white residents of the county behaved toward their free black neighbors, but there is little evidence of any official action. The county court adopted no new policies regarding free blacks until August, when it carried out a recent state mandate to enroll free black men between the ages of 18 and 50 for possible conscription as laborers, and only two free blacks came before the court during the first six months of 1861: Andrew Young for “Gaming” and James Marrs for giving his free papers to Isaac, a slave of
James Preston. Neither offense was new, and either man might have been charged for his actions (or not) at any time during the preceding thirty years.28

Further complicating the picture is the ultimate outcome of these cases. Early in June, while in jail awaiting trial, both Young and Marrs asked the court to release them so they could “volunteer in the service of the state in the present war.” The court granted their requests, released both men, and even ordered the clerk of the court to provide Marrs with new free papers to replace those he had, allegedly, given to Isaac. It has proven impossible, thus far, to discover whether or not either man actually sought to enlist. What is clear is that members of the county court—white men, of property—believed that their doing so was possible and acted accordingly. Clearly, in spite of rising anxiety in some quarters, not everyone in Montgomery County saw free blacks as a threat.29

Finally, in addition to the threat posed by free and enslaved African Americans, white residents of Montgomery County also worried about the danger presented by white Unionists. During the early months of 1861, Unionists were almost certainly still a majority among the county’s white residents. Between them, John Bell and Stephen Douglas had received nearly two-thirds of the votes cast in the presidential election. Once the state convention had voted to secede, Unionists became less visible, but they were still there. Daniel H. Hoge, who spoke out against buying additional arms in March, had not changed his views. Men like Hoge and Giles Thomas, who had ridiculed secessionists in February, seem not to have worried their neighbors particularly. They were men of property, and people apparently expected they would behave accordingly; so they were tolerated. Far more worrisome were less affluent Unionists, such as those reputed to be living in the community of Prices Fork.30

Mary Elizabeth Caperton spent the spring of 1861 visiting her sister-in-law, Sarah Anne Caperton Preston, at White Thorn, just a few miles from Prices Fork. Letters she wrote to her husband from White Thorn include several showing the concern felt by wealthy plantation-owners in the area, such as the Prestons, Kents, and Oteys, toward their neighbors in Prices Fork. In one letter, for example, Caperton described Prices Fork as a community of “poor people who are very rampant just now” and reported that the Kents and Prestons “seemed much concerned about the Union feeling” there. Another prominent figure in the county, D. W. L. Charlton, expressed similar sentiments. Writing from Christiansburg in May of 1861, Charlton told a friend: “[W]e expect to have trouble at Prices Fork yet.”31

Concern about Unionists in the county rose dramatically in May as word spread of an alleged conspiracy between white Unionists and local slaves to murder several prominent planters around Prices Fork and free
their slaves. It remains unclear from the surviving evidence just how widespread the conspiracy was. Only one white man and one slave were ever specifically identified in reports of the plot. No other slaves or free blacks living near Prices Fork reported any knowledge of it; not even those who later filed with the Southern Claims Commission, and therefore had a vested interest in showing their loyalty, ever mentioned it. Whether or not the threat was real, though, is irrelevant. White residents of the county believed it was real and acted as if it were.32

The reputed mastermind of the plot was Enos Price, a 40-year-old, white “stone cutter” living near Prices Fork. Witnesses reported that Price began meeting some time in May with Washington, a young man enslaved by James H. Otey, a doctor and planter who lived north of Prices Fork and also served as captain of the Home Guard in that district. Otey testified that Washington told him on May 12 that he had been meeting with Price and that Price had urged him to help kill a number of leading planters in the neighborhood. According to one account, Price told Washington: “Lincoln would free the slaves but the only way he could do so would be to get rid of such men as the negroes’ master and Major Kent etc. and that to accomplish this the negroes would have to put their masters out of the way.” Price and Washington met again on May 14 and agreed to another meeting on May 16.33

Washington also told Otey about the planned meeting, though, and on the evening of May 16, Otey and two other members of the Home Guard arrived at the abandoned house where Price and Washington were meeting just in time to eavesdrop on much of their conversation. According to Otey, Price told Washington that he had 2,000 men ready to help execute his plan and that “all the negroes had to do was to fight like hell, for a few days, and all would be well with them, that their freedom was certain, that if the larger slave holders were killed off the others would be easily managed.” He directed Washington to visit the plantations of four of the largest slave-owners in the district—James R. Kent, James F. Preston, William Ballard Preston, and Robert T. Preston—after dark on Friday, May 17, and tell slaves on each of their plantations that “Saturday night was the night for their work.” Washington pointed out that he could not travel that far in a single night and make it home by daybreak and suggested delaying the attack for several days. Price was insistent, though, telling Washington they “had put it off too long already.” The county’s volunteers would be back soon, he explained, and once they returned it would be impossible to act. Finally, Price told Washington that he and the other slaves should kill their masters quietly and bring Price any money they found so he could use it to buy equipment for the insurrection. At that point, Otey and his men
According to witnesses, Enos Price assured Washington, a young slave who lived on the farm of Dr. James Otey (center oval), that “if the larger slave holders were killed off the others would be easily managed.” Price then directed Washington to visit the plantations of James Kent (left) and the three Preston brothers – James, William Ballard, and Robert (right) – in order to convince slaves on those estates to join Washington in killing their masters.
entered the house and captured Price, who was taken before a magistrate in Christiansburg and held for further questioning.34

Word of the plot spread quickly. Price was captured just before The New Star printed its May 18 edition, and the paper published a brief account that made clear to its readers Price had been caught in the act of “inciting the negroes (or a negro) to insurrection.” The paper also urged the public to prepare in case other conspiracies were afoot. It suggested that citizens clean their guns, stockpile ammunition, and “learn your wives and daughters how to use the gun and pistol.” At White Thorn, which was to have been one of Price’s targets, Mary Elizabeth Caperton was able to make light of the threat, telling her husband in a letter the following Monday: “We are all well and no attempt ‘to kill the Prestons’ Saturday night!” Another letter, however, reveals that Caperton was not entirely at ease and that others in the neighborhood were even more nervous than she. On May 27, she described being awakened recently by a violent thunderstorm and a bolt of lightening that ignited a barn fire. Caperton readily confessed, “[T]he thought flashed across my mind that perhaps the Prices were about to attack us.” She then went on to explain that such thoughts flashed across other minds as well:

The consternation at Smithfield they say was truly awful. The storm was not so bad there and they did not think of lightening. The servants gave the alarm and Mr. [Wm. B.] Preston jumped up, called for his pistol and knife and started off. In about 15 minutes after we were roused 4 of the home guard from Blacksburg came riding up with guns, but Mr. Legerwood [the overseer] told them they could put down their horses and guns and come help fight the fire.35

The source of this anxiety, Enos Price, was examined soon after by the full county court and bound over for trial before the circuit court. In September he was indicted for conspiring “to rebel and make insurrection”; he was then arraigned and returned to jail to await trial. Sometime that fall or winter, though, Price “broke jail” and escaped. Governor John Letcher offered a reward of $100 for his capture, but Price eluded the law until the fall of the Confederacy. After that he reappeared in the county and settled quietly on a farm near Poverty Creek. There is no evidence that Washington, Price’s alleged co-conspirator, was ever tried for his role in the plot or rewarded for his role in exposing it.36

Just a week after Enos Price was captured, and with news of his attempted “insurrection” buzzing through the county, its residents went to the polls to have their say about secession. It was rather a pointless exercise; Virginia had effectively left the Union immediately after the vote of the convention, and
thousands of Virginia men were already serving in the Confederate army. The convention had called for a referendum, though, and in Montgomery County, at least, supporters of secession were determined to show a unified front.

In the days preceding the election, pro-secession forces made it clear that voting “no” or even neglecting to vote would be dangerous options. Stephen Childress and James Hight both testified later that “force” was used to intimidate voters in the Childress Store portion of the county. According to Childress, “a company of armed men went through the neighborhood notifying persons that if they failed to go and vote for ratification of the ordinance of secession that their persons and property would not be protected.” Mary Elizabeth Caperton reported similar tactics around Prices Fork. Leading secessionists in the district had heard that as many as fifty men in the neighborhood might vote no in the referendum and declared that any who did so would “suffer.” According to Caperton, Dr. Otey went about wearing a pistol and “a large knife” before the election, and one of the Prestons declared that “we are in the midst of a revolution and if ... these men dare to oppose the acts of the convention that there will be blood spilled in Montgomery.”

The effect of such threats was certainly visible when the votes were counted on May 23. First, turnout for the referendum on secession was considerably higher than that recorded six months earlier in the presidential election. In November, a total of 1,211 votes had been cast in Montgomery County, but in May the number was 1,395—an increase of 15 percent. It is possible that some of the increase was a result of accidental or deliberate miscounting. The accounts of Childress and Caperton suggest, however, that a likelier explanation is that men who had not bothered to vote in November dared not stay home this time and be identified as Unionists. The other apparent result of the secessionists’ strong-arm approach to the referendum was the total absence of no votes. Virginia did not employ the secret ballot; so anyone watching at the polls knew exactly how every individual voted. For that reason, perhaps, the vote was unanimous: 1,395 votes were cast in favor of secession and none against.

Election day May 23, 1861, saw the close of Montgomery County’s secession crisis. Its residents had spoken, at least those who were allowed to, and the matter had been settled, officially at least. This was, of course, an illusion. Events during the preceding six months had shown clearly the differences of opinion that existed among county residents. For now, those differences had been suppressed. By summer the county had settled down and begun moving quickly into a wartime routine. Support for that war would never be universal, though, even among the county’s white residents. Whatever the vote recorded in the referendum, significant numbers of people in Montgomery County had
opposed secession. They also opposed the war, and as time passed, their number increased and their opposition became more visible. The county’s secession crisis had passed, but its wartime crisis was just beginning.

Endnotes


11. Giles Thomas to William Hoge, February 14, 1861, Box 1, Folder 5, William E. Hoge Family Papers, Ms 2003-019, Special Collections, Virginia Tech.


24. The New Star, Sept. 1, Sept. 15, and Nov. 24, 1860; Mary Elizabeth. Caperton to George Henry Caperton, May 9, 1861, Caperton Family Papers, Ms 91-034, Special Collections, Virginia Tech.

25. Mary Elizabeth Caperton to George Henry Caperton, May 9, 1861, Caperton Family Papers; The New Star, May 4, 1861.


28. [Proceedings of the County Court March 4, April 1, and June 3, 1861] Order Book / Co. Court Com. Law & Chancy. / 1859–1868, MCCH.

29. Ibid. Confederate service records have survived for Virginians named James Marrs and Andrew Young. One man named James Marrs was even described as having a “dark” complexion, though he was also five inches shorter than the James Marrs described in Montgomery County (Number 107, Book of Free Negroes, MCCH; John D. Chapla, 42nd Virginia Infantry [Lynchburg, Va.: H.E. Howard, 1983], 59 and 115).


31. Mary Elizabeth Caperton to George Henry Caperton, May 14, May 20, and May 27, 1861, Caperton Family Papers; D. W. L. Charlton to “Dear Friend Oliver,” May 23, 1861, Folder V, Charlton Family Papers, Ms 80-00 I, Special Collections, Virginia Tech.

32. See, for example, the claims of William Moon (Montgomery County) and Edmund Otey (Roanoke County) among the Approved Claims and the Barred and Disallowed Claims from Virginia. The originals are in Record Groups 217 and 233 in the National Archives but are more readily accessible through Fold3.com.

34. Commonwealth v. Price, Criminal A-655, MCCH.

35. The New Star, May 18, 1861; Mary Elizabeth Caperton to George Henry Caperton, May 20 and 27, 1861, Caperton Family Papers.


37. Claim of Stephen Childress (Montgomery County), Barred and Disallowed Claims, Southern Claims Commission; Mary Elizabeth Caperton to George Henry Caperton, May 14 and 20, 1861, Caperton Family Papers.