"Civil War History" – WV Tourism

<<This information is from a WV Division of Tourism website that has been deactivated.>>

The slavery question, which between 1830 and 1860 tore at the fabric of the nation, left the Commonwealth of Virginia equally as divided.

Perhaps the most incendiary of all events connected with the slavery issue took place on what is now West Virginia soil, with **the seizure of the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859 by the fiery abolitionist, John Brown.** His plan for arming the slaves of northern Virginia and coordinating an uprising, together with the secretiveness with which his plan was carried out, threw the South into a panic.

In the wake of the firing upon Fort Sumter and President Lincoln's call for volunteers, sentiment in the Virginia Convention shifted drastically. Many delegates who had opposed secession now just as vigorously opposed the President's intention to use the coercive powers of the federal government against a state. Therefore, **when the question of Virginia's position came to a vote, the majority cast their ballots in favor of joining the newly formed Confederate States of America. However, of the 47 delegates from western Virginia, 32, or more than two-thirds, voted against leaving the Union.**

The future of the newly proposed state depended upon control of western Virginia by Union military forces. From the outset of the war, both the Union and Confederate governments endeavored to hold western Virginia because of its valuable salt resources, its productive farms and the strategic section of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which traversed the eastern and northern sections of the state. Moreover, **both sides were well aware of the psychological advantages in controlling western Virginia**. For the **Union, its possession would represent a serious inroad into the Old Dominion,** the most prestigious state of the Confederacy. For the **Confederacy, its retention as a part of Virginia would demonstrate strength and help preserve the high morale prevalent in much of the South at the beginning of the war.**

Most of the decisive fighting in what is now West Virginia took place before the end of 1861. In the Eastern Panhandle, positions sometimes changed hands with bewildering frequency. Throughout the war, military action there revolved around **efforts to gain or retain control of valuable segments of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.** In the campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley, western Virginia's distinguished Confederate General, Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson, played a vital part. Farther south, **the Confederates took the initiative and pushed Union troops out of Fayetteville and Charleston. With the engagements at White Sulphur Springs (or Rocky Gap) and Droop Mountain in the autumn of 1863, the Confederates had been forced out of most of West Virginia.**

During the early years of the Civil War, the statehood issue continued to be debated. The Restored Government of Virginia eventually approved of the separation, which left Congress as the last hurdle. After considerable debate**, the West Virginia statehood bill passed the U.S. Senate by a vote of 23 to 15, and the House of Representatives by a vote of 96 to 55. Although he had misgivings about the statehood question, President Lincoln issued a proclamation under which West Virginia entered the Union on June 20, 1863, as the 35th state.**
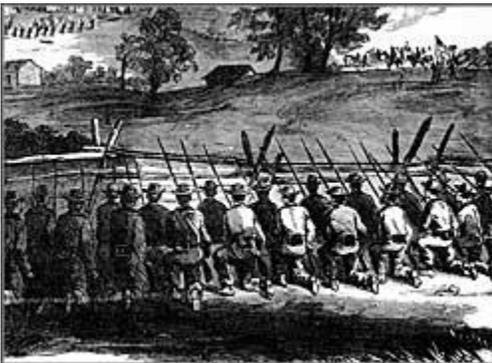
The Civil War has often been referred to as a war of brother against brother and father against son. No other state serves as a better example of this than West Virginia, where there was relatively equal support for the northern and southern causes. Often families were split down the middle over their beliefs on the war. There are many instances of divided loyalties and individuals fighting for both sides.

While many historians have traditionally placed the number of Union troops from West Virginia at a much higher figure than Confederates, more recent studies suggest there were almost as many southern troops as northern. Traditional sources have placed the number of Union soldiers from West Virginia as high as 36,000, compared to only 7,000 to 10,000 Confederates. Many of the Union soldiers in West Virginia regiments were from Ohio and Pennsylvania. **At least one recent study has raised the southern number to more than 20,000 and lowered the Union figure to about the same.**

The First Campaign:

On June 3, 1861, Philippi, West Virginia was the site of the first land battle of the Civil War. Built in 1852, the Philippi covered bridge was heavily utilized by both armies.

West Virginia, born of a nation divided, was the setting for the First Campaign of America's Civil War. Although still part of Virginia in 1861, many citizens of the western half of the state were loyal to the Union. **By late May of 1861, Union Gen. George B. McClellan, commanding the Department of the Ohio, launched the First Campaign – ordering troops to cross the Ohio River and secure western Virginia for the Union. The resulting battles were fought in West Virginia's mountains, in what is now Barbour, Taylor, Tucker, Randolph and Pocahontas counties.**

During June and July of 1861, **McClellan's army won the inaugural Union victories of the Civil War. Federal troops now occupied western Virginia** as loyal delegates met in Wheeling to form the Restored Government of Virginia, a Union government to oppose the Confederate one in Richmond. In August**, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee tried – and failed – to reclaim that part of Virginia, and by 1862 the conflict had shifted east.** The First Campaign proved to be decisive: In 1863, the western counties under Union control became the new state of West Virginia.