

"Road to West Virginia Statehood" - WV Sesquicentennial Commission



"Being a child of the Civil War, West Virginia's road to statehood is unique. Tension between western and eastern Virginia can be traced to at least 1776 when the Virginia Constitution granted voting rights only to white males owning at least 25 acres of improved land. This qualification favored the eastern portion of the state. Also, the Virginia Constitution allowed 2 delegates per county, regardless of population. The western part of the state only had a few counties that were very large geographically, so representation in the House of Delegates favored eastern Virginia as well.

"Attempts to have western Virginia's concerns addressed were merely temporary fixes. Conventions were held in Staunton in 1816 and 1825 and in Richmond in 1829 and 1850 to attempt to resolve the differences. The Virginia Constitution was amended in 1830 and 1851. While more white men were granted the right to vote and the western regions were given greater representation, along with more infrastructure improvement projects, these issues continued to divide the state.

"The catalyst that led to the final break between western and eastern Virginia occurred in 1860 with the election of Abraham Lincoln. States in the Deep South were convinced Lincoln would abolish slavery and they decided to secede from the Union. A majority of Virginia delegates initially supported staying in the Union until the attack on Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for the states to furnish volunteers to put down the rebellion. These actions changed many people's minds.

"On April 17, 1861, the Virginia state convention approved an Ordinance of Secession that voters would later approve. Many delegates from western Virginia were against secession. They met in Wheeling to discuss forming a government that would stay in the Union. Since the election for the Ordinance had not yet taken place, the western delegates resolved to return to their home areas and work to defeat it. When their efforts were unsuccessful, these pro-Union men returned to Wheeling in June, 1861. With the Union army in control of northwestern Virginia, these delegates formed the Restored, or Reorganized, government of Virginia.

"The Reorganized Government elected Francis H. Pierpont as governor. Others took seats representing Virginia in the U.S. House and Senate. By allowing these men their seats in Congress, the federal government recognized the Reorganized Government of Virginia as legitimate. In August, 1861, the Reorganized Government approved the creation of the state of Kanawha from 39 western counties. This was an important step since the U.S. Constitution requires that if a new state is formed from an existing state, the existing state must approve the formation of the new state. Voters in the 39 counties approved formation of this new state.

"In November, 1861, a Constitutional Convention began in Wheeling. The convention changed the name of the new state to West Virginia. The boundaries for the state included the 39 original counties plus five additional counties and recognized seven more counties could join if their voters approved. Slavery was debated at the convention, however the constitution presented to the voters stated only that no slaves should be brought into the state or free persons of color be allowed to move into the state.

"After much deliberation regarding the constitutionality of the new state and its future stance on slavery, the U.S. Senate approved the measure in July, 1862 with the Willey Amendment that called for gradual

emancipation of slaves. The House of Representatives approved the bill for statehood, with the amendment, in December of 1862 and President Lincoln signed it on December 31, 1862. The Constitutional Convention quickly reconvened and approved the Willey Amendment. **Voters approved the new constitution with the amendment added in March, 1863. Elections were held for governor and other offices in May of 1863, West Virginia officially became a state on June 20, 1863."**
