

Civil War Era Module Secession

Virginia's really a middle state in this growing contest between North and South. Much of the South is reliant on what's called "staple crop agriculture" or "commercial agriculture." People grow one crop and they sell it for cash. They use the cash to buy everything else that they need.

So, much of the South doesn't grow food. It's not self-sufficient. Virginia is a little bit more diversified. It is still dependent on a cash crop. You grow lots of tobacco in order to sell it and then you use the money to buy the other things that you need. The problem with tobacco is that it wears soil out very quickly. So by the time Harper's Ferry happens Virginia has actually been in a state of decline. It's soil is wearing out because of tobacco farming.

There are sections of the state, however, that are more diversified—that grow wheat, potatoes, things that you would need to eat. The big crops grown for money are dependent on a slave labor force. The other crops—wheat, corn, the things that you can live off of—sometimes those are grown in the slave labor and sometimes they are not.

As these large plantations become less profitable, the plantation owners find that they have more laborers than they need, but there are big cotton plantations in Alabama and in Georgia. So selling your slaves South is one of the single biggest sources of revenue for the whole state of Virginia. So in that sense, Virginia is very closely tied in to the deeper South.

The North is still a largely agricultural society. The North is also beginning to develop what we would recognize as an industrialized base. So diversified agriculture helps the North because all those people in the factories need wheat and corn and they need things to eat. Virginia in parts has a mixed economy, too. The largest ironworks in the country is in Virginia. There are factories and textile mills. It has clear links to the staple crop, plantation, slave-based agriculture of the lower South.

It also, though, has more diversified agriculture than much of the South. And it also is beginning to develop industry like the North. So when John Brown happens and when the Civil War happens, Virginia's really torn. Many Virginians feel ties to the South, but many feel ties to the United States as well. So it's a very interesting state to look at in 1860. It's a crossroads for many of the different ways of life in the United States at the time.

Lincoln takes office in March of 1861. Seven states have left the Union and formed the Confederacy. The standoff comes to center on a fort outside of the city of Charleston called Fort Sumter. The governor of South Carolina demanded the surrender of the fort to South Carolina and the United States Army officer inside said no. He couldn't give a United States fort to a state that had left the Union because that would be treason.

So Abraham Lincoln takes office and he immediately learns that here is this fort in the harbor outside of South Carolina and the soldiers have no food left. Lincoln decides that what he must do as a Commander in Chief is supply food to those soldiers. So he writes to the governor of South

Carolina and he writes to Jefferson Davis who has now become the president of this new Confederates States of America. And he tells him, I'm sending a ship with food and I'm not sending arms. If you fire on us, we will fire back. But we're just sending food and not arms.

Then Jefferson Davis and the governor of South Carolina have to decide what to do. Do they want the United States, who they now see as an enemy, sailing into Charleston harbor or not? And they decide not to take the chance. They fire on Fort Sumter before the food gets there. To Lincoln and to much of the Northern public, now we have a open rebellion.

So Lincoln calls for 75,000 volunteers, soldiers, to put down the rebellion. Virginia and three other states—Tennessee, Arkansas and North Carolina—were hoping not to have to choose. But when Lincoln calls for 75,000 troops to put down the rebellion, they have to decide. Are we going to fight with or against the Union or the Southern states? And Virginia decides to go with the Southern states. It's a hard decision for many white Virginians.

It feels links with the states that have left, but it also feels links with the Union. The other reason why this is a difficult decision for Virginia is because it is located so close to the national capitol. It was pretty clear to Virginians that a lot of the fighting was going to take place in Virginia. And they were right.

West Virginia is more tied to the North. There are very few slaves. Agriculture there is very diversified. There's not a lot of tobacco grown for cash. It looks much more like a Northern economy than a Southern economy. The state of Virginia has decided to secede, to leave the Union, but we don't want to. We actually see that as being a traitor to the United States. So these counties decide to secede from Virginia and they enter the United States in 1863 as the state of West Virginia.