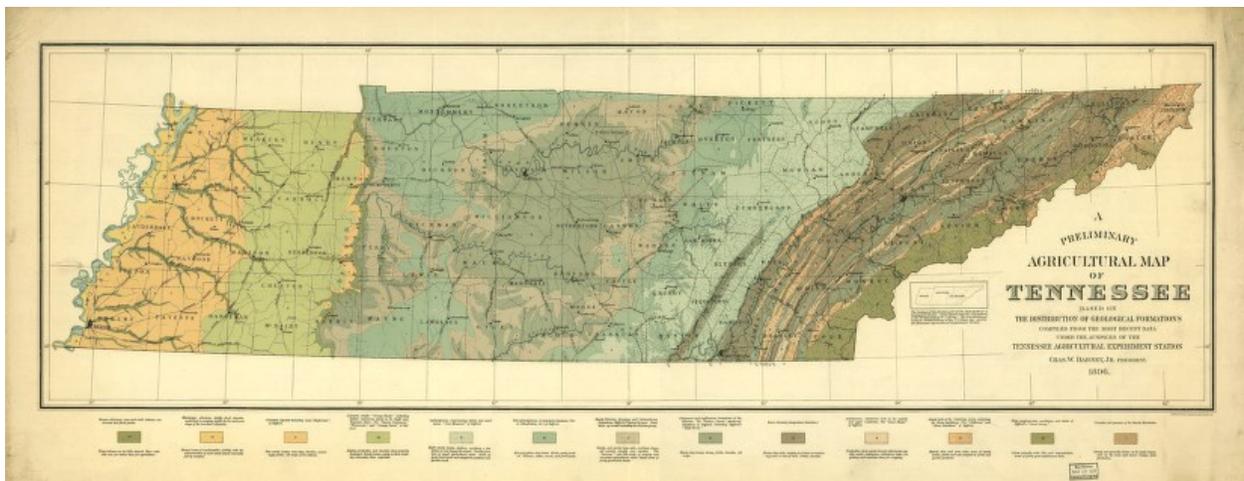


Teaching with Primary Sources—MTSU

DIVIDED TENNESSEE: THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR

When Tennessee seceded from the United States on June 8, 1861, it became the last of eleven states to join the Confederacy. Tennessee's late decision reflects the turmoil among its citizens over this momentous choice. Before, during, and after the Civil War, Tennesseans remained divided over the best course of action to take with respect to the Union.

The different geographies, economies, and histories of Tennessee's three grand divisions influenced the politics of each region. In mountainous East Tennessee, with its small farms and strong historical ties to the American Revolution, Unionism took firm root. In the flatlands of West Tennessee, which had a cotton-based economy and was home to close to 70% of the state's slaves, support for secession grew strong. In Middle Tennessee, with its mixture of large plantations and small farms, residents exhibited little support for secession until after the April 1861 firing on Fort Sumter and President Abraham Lincoln's call for troops.



[A preliminary agricultural map of Tennessee based on the distribution of geological formations.](#) [1896]

To understand Tennessee's divisions over secession, it is necessary to look back to the period from 1830-1860. For most of this time, two major national parties, the Democrats and the Whigs, dominated politics. The Democrats supported limited government and a strict reading of the U.S. Constitution. The Whigs promoted a protective tariff, a national bank, and internal improvements funded by the federal government.

After the Mexican War ended in 1848, the issue of slavery and its possible extension into the country's new landholdings in the West became all-consuming. (This newly acquired territory consisted of present-day California, Nevada, and Utah, along with most of New Mexico and Arizona and some of Oklahoma, Colorado, and Wyoming). Whigs and Democrats created national compromises to deal with the issue of slavery's extension, including the Compromise of 1850 (which included a controversial fugitive slave provision requiring Northerners to assist with the return of escaped slaves) and the Kansas-

Nebraska Act of 1854 (which overturned the Missouri Compromise's ban on slavery north of the 36° 30' parallel).

Within Tennessee during the antebellum period, the two major political parties battled for votes, and public interest in politics was quite high. The Democrats were led early in the period by President Andrew Jackson and later by Andrew Johnson and Isham Harris; the Whigs were led by John Bell. In statewide elections, candidates ran intense campaigns, voters turned out in droves, and the final results were very close. During the 1840s, the Whigs won six out of eight of the elections for governor and president; during the 1850s, the Democrats won five out of seven.

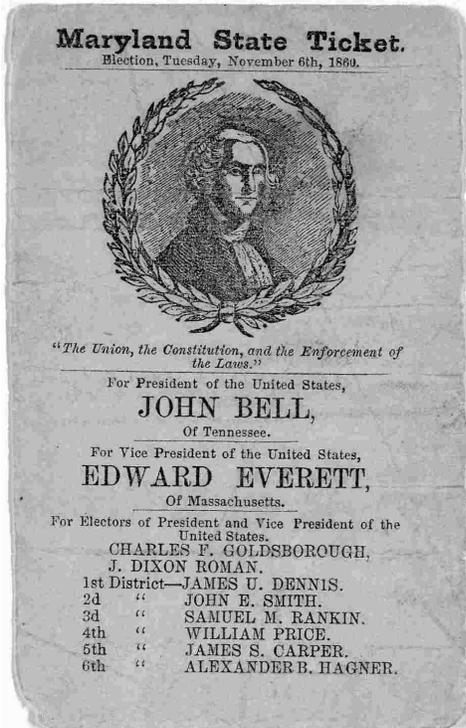
As politics flourished in the state, so did slavery, which had become increasingly entrenched over the course of the 1800s. Certainly, there was opposition to slavery in Tennessee. Protests against slavery included the actions of slaves themselves, either through defiance and work stoppages or, most powerfully, through running away. At least one escaped Tennessee slave, the Rev. Jermain Wesley Loguen, published a narrative that denounced slavery as “an overgrown monster that devours alike law and humanity.” There was also some anti-slavery activity among white Tennesseans, particularly in East Tennessee. Still, most white Tennesseans defended slavery and, like most nineteenth-century white Americans in the North and South, viewed blacks as an inferior race of people that had to be controlled. Although most white Tennesseans did not own slaves, many hoped to do so someday. By 1860, the state had 275,000 slaves, close to 25% of the population, and only 7300 free blacks. Prices for slaves were high due to the great demand for enslaved workers in the cotton fields of the new state of Texas.



[The Rev. J.W. Loguen, as a slave and as a freeman : a narrative of real life / Loguen, Jermain Wesley.](#) [1859] *Courtesy of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

As sectional tensions over slavery increased in the 1850s, Tennesseans generally responded moderately. When talk of secession arose early in the decade, Governor William Bowen Campbell discouraged it decisively. The legacy of Andrew Jackson's opposition to South Carolinians' attempt to nullify federal tariffs in 1832 continued to have influence. Also, given how close state elections were in Tennessee, politicians did not want to alienate voters in East Tennessee, where unionism was strong.

At the same time, important changes were taking place on Tennessee's political landscape. As the Whig party disintegrated nationally after passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, it also lost clout within Tennessee, and many former Whigs became Democrats. The Republican party, which emerged in the Midwest among opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and eventually included many former Whigs, never gained any footing in the state. A key element of the Republican platform was opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories, and many white Tennesseans viewed the party as abolitionist. In addition, events in the late 1850s—especially the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision declaring that Congress could not exclude slavery from the territories (1857) and John Brown's attempt to generate a widespread slave rebellion through a raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (1859)—deepened the divide between the North and South.



[Maryland state ticket. Election, Tuesday November 6th, 1860 ... For President of the United States John Bell of Tennessee. For Vice President of the United States, Edward Everett of Massachusetts. ... \[n. p. 1860\].](#)

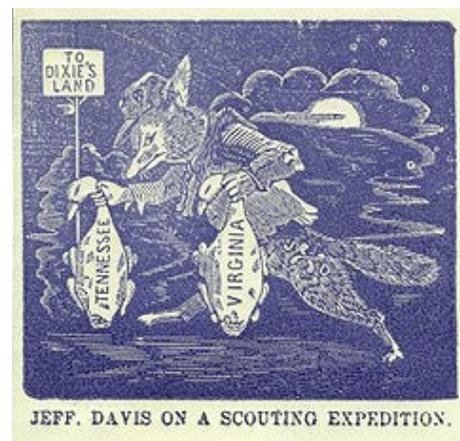
In the 1860 presidential election, the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, did not even appear on the ballot in Tennessee. The Democrats fielded two candidates, Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois and John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. In Tennessee, the Democrats ended up winning 52% of the vote, divided between the two candidates. John Bell of Nashville, the candidate of the recently formed Constitutional Union party, won the state's electoral vote with a plurality of 48% of the popular vote.

As seven states in the Lower South seceded after the election of President Lincoln and created the Confederacy, pressure increased on Tennessee and other Upper South states. Governor Isham Harris and some other Democrats supported secession but trod lightly so as not to create a backlash. In February 1861, voters emphatically rejected holding a state convention on secession.

Two months later, everything changed. After the Confederates fired on federal Fort Sumter off the coast of South Carolina, President Lincoln called for 75,000 troops, including two regiments from Tennessee, to put down the rebellion. The General Assembly declared independence and approved aligning with the Confederacy. On June 8, 1861, voters in West and Middle Tennessee supported the legislature's decision on secession, but voters in East Tennessee still rejected it. Unionists in the East unsuccessfully petitioned the state to remain part of the United States. East Tennessean Andrew Johnson became the only U.S.

senator from a Confederate state to remain loyal to the Union, and he would later be rewarded by being appointed military governor of Tennessee in 1862 and selected as President's Lincoln's running mate in 1864.

Thus, as the war began, Tennessee was divided regionally, and within each region, divisions existed as well. Communities and even families sometimes had divergent views on whether secession or union was best for Tennessee. Personal accounts reflect the widespread divisions across the state in the early years of the war. In July 1861, Martha Hall of Knoxville wrote to her sister, "How any Tennessean can be for the Lincoln government, under all the circumstances, is to me a mystery of mysteries." Some Unionists, in fact, chose to leave the state. Hermann Bokum, a German immigrant, went North in 1862 and the next year published a testimonial in which he denounced the break-up of the Union and the treatment of Unionists in East Tennessee. At the other end of the state, Memphis resident Juliette Western found herself in a delicate situation in the summer of 1861. Her father was a Kentucky Unionist while her husband was an enthusiastic secessionist who had joined Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry. When a Northern couple got stranded in



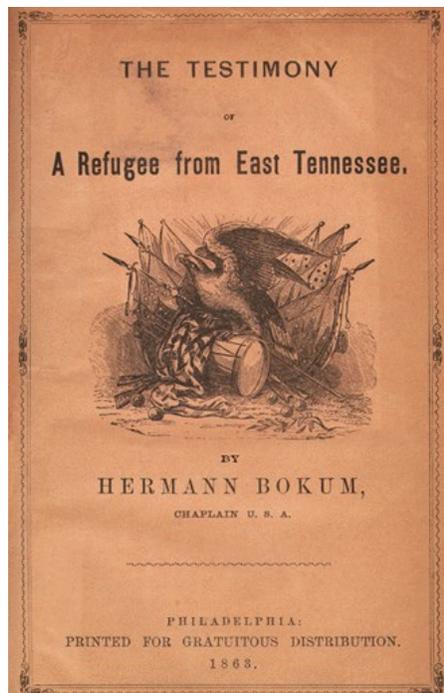
JEFF. DAVIS ON A SCOUTING EXPEDITION.

[Jeff Davis on a scouting expedition. \[Pictorial envelope\] \[n.d.\]](#)

Memphis, she sheltered them for a week at her home despite the protests of local Confederates. Murfreesboro resident Kate Carney referred to divisions within her parents' slaveholding household, as family members supported the Confederacy and house servants showed their preference for the Union.

Whether Confederate or Unionist, most Tennesseans expected the Civil War to end relatively quickly, without much bloodshed. Few predicted the devastation that would take place between 1861 and 1865. Tennessee became a key battleground because of its strategic location between the eastern seaboard and the Mississippi River. Both the Confederacy and the Union wanted to control the state's rich resources, particularly its rivers and railroads. By the end of the war, about 3,245 combat incidents would take place in Tennessee, second only to Virginia.

[The testimony of a refugee from east Tennessee / Bokum, Hermann, 1807-1878.](#) Courtesy of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



Resources

- Primary Source Set and Webcast: Prelude to the Civil War in Tennessee. <http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/webcasts.php>
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- Nation Divides Reproducible Activity. <http://www.sitemason.com/files/gJgvUk/The%20Nation%20Divides%20activity.pdf>