



UNION OR SECESSION: VIRGINIANS DECIDE  
AND  
THE STRUGGLE TO DECIDE: VIRGINIA'S SECESSION CRISIS

Summary of Exhibition Content and VSOL Correlations

**Union or Secession: Virginians Decide**  
**On display at the Library of Virginia**

*Because this exhibition incorporates a variety of primary source documents—letters, newspaper entries, broadsides, photographs, cartoons, and maps—the following “Essential Skills” are addressed throughout the exhibition:*

*VS.1—The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis and responsible citizenship, including the ability to*

- a) identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand events in history;*
- b) determine cause-and-effect relationships;*
- c) compare and contrast historical events;*
- d) draw conclusions and make generalizations;*
- e) make connections between past and present;*
- f) sequence events in Virginia history;*
- g) interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives;*
- i) analyze and interpret maps to explain relationships among landforms, water features, climatic characteristics, and historical events.*

**Virginia in 1860: Multiple Spheres, Many Virginias** (VS.7a, USI.9a, VUS.6e)

The disparate nature of Virginia's economic spheres reflected the great variety among the state's economic, political, and cultural leaders. The 1850s saw considerable expansion of Virginia's economy and commercial connections, but the state had no single economic center.

**To the North and West** (VS.7a, USI.9a, VUS.6e)

By 1860 the economic activity of the South, including Virginia, overwhelmingly tilted north and west, with a coastal trade centering on the major Eastern ports, especially New York. Virginia retailers and merchants bought fancy goods, hardware, dry goods, and other commodities in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, and Virginia's tobacco factories shipped their product largely through Northern middlemen in the same cities.

### **To the South: Wheat, Slaves, and Southern Iron** (VS.7a, USI.8c, USI.9a, VUS.6e)

By 1860, Virginia boasted 1,771 miles of track, the most of any Southern state. Virginia ironmasters exploited Southern pride in bidding for construction contracts on the new railroad lines. Virginia shipped flour and other milled grains directly to South America and developed into the nation's largest coffee market. The domestic slave trade was the single greatest commercial enterprise tying antebellum Virginia to the South and was likely the largest capital business in the state.

### **Cultural Connections** (VS.7a, USI.9a, VUS.6e)

Many Virginians shared as much culturally and socially with residents of nearby Free states to the north and west as with residents of the slave states in the lower South. Social connections united fraternal orders in particular, with their national organizations' deep roots in the North and South.

### **Slavery** (VS.7a, USI.9b, VUS.6e, VUS.7a)

In 1860, about one-third of all Virginians—nearly half a million people—were held in slavery. More enslaved people and more owners of the enslaved lived in Virginia than in any other state. Within the confines of this oppressive system, enslaved men and women asserted their humanity and built a distinctive African American culture.

### **John Brown's Raid** (VS.7a, USI.8d, USI.9b, VUS.6e, VUS.7a)

On October 16, 1859, John Brown led eighteen men—thirteen whites and five blacks—into Harpers Ferry, Virginia, intending to provoke an uprising of African Americans that would lead to a war against slavery. Brown's raid confirmed for many Southerners the existence of a widespread Northern plot against slavery, further polarizing these sections of the nation.

### **The 1860 Presidential Campaign: Four Candidates** (VS.7a, USI.9b, VUS.6e, VUS.7a–b)

Sectional tensions were unusually high during the 1860 presidential election. The Democratic Party had split into two factions over sectional differences. A new political group, the Constitutional Union Party, formed in hopes of achieving compromise. Opinions were so strong that some Southerners talked of disunion if a Republican were elected.

### **The Beginning of Secession** (USI.9c–d, VUS.7 a–b)

Soon after Lincoln's election, advocates of disunion in South Carolina organized a convention that on December 20, 1860, repealed that state's ratification of the United States Constitution. Before Lincoln was sworn into office, six more states seceded. What would Virginians decide? The success of the new government, and the stability of the old, hung in the balance.

### **Wait-a-Bit** (USI.9b)

The convention that met in Richmond from February 14 to May 1 was a Union convention for its first two months. The Unionist majority believed that if Virginia

remained in the Union—if everybody waited a bit—it could engage the other upper South slave states in crafting a compromise to save the Union.

**To Go or to Stay: The First Vote, April 4, 1861** (USI.9b)

Even as late as April, secessionists were in the minority in the Virginia Convention of 1861. The first vote for secession failed to pass in the Virginia convention by a vote of 90 to 45.

**The Crisis Intensifies: Fort Sumter, April 12, 1861** (USI.9b&d, VUS.7a–b)

The firing on Fort Sumter brought the possibility of war to the brink. Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 volunteers from the remaining states in the Union to put down what he called a rebellion against the federal government. Virginia governor John Letcher refused to mobilize the militia to take part in the action against the Confederacy.

**The Convention Votes Again, April 17, 1861** (VS.7a, USI.9d, VUS.7a–b)

Lincoln’s call for volunteers changed the political situation in Virginia. On April 17, 1861, the delegates of the Virginia convention voted 88 to 55 to submit the Ordinance of Secession to voters for ratification on May 23, 1861.

**Virginia Women Take Sides** (VS.7b–c, USI.9f, VUS.7e)

While women couldn’t vote or fight in the military, they made their opinions known in other ways. Virginia women, both Unionist and secessionists, formed societies to make clothing, bedding, tents, knapsacks, and bandages for men who volunteered to serve.

**“Among the things that were”** (VS.7c, USI.9f, VUS. 7e)

Many enslaved Virginians thoroughly understood the political events of the secession crisis and the potential outcomes, especially the possibility of emancipation.

**First Shots** (VS.7b, USI.9e)

Even before the vote for secession, Virginia militia companies reorganized and offered their services to Virginia. The United States Army occupied Fort Monroe and Alexandria, and fighting took place at Philippi, Bethel Church, Rich Mountain, and Manassas.

**“What shall Western Virginia Do?”** (VS.7a)

Outraged at the vote for secession, delegates from several northwestern Unionist delegates left Richmond and began to organize a Virginia government loyal to the Union. Their efforts led to the creation of the state of West Virginia.

**The Struggle to Decide: Virginia’s Secession Crisis**  
**On display at the Virginia Capitol Visitors Center**

All eyes were on Virginia during the winter of 1860–1861, and leaders of both the United States and Confederate governments understood Virginia’s pivotal role in shaping

opinion on Union and secession. Lower South states sent commissioners to convince Virginians that their fates were tied to the slaveholding South; and U.S. government officials courted Virginia leaders in hopes of brokering a compromise. Virginia's decision in April 1861 fundamentally shaped the course of all subsequent events.

### **One Capitol, Two Governments** (VS.7b, VUS.7e)

Beginning in the spring of 1861, Virginia's Capitol Square neighborhood was a bustling hive of extraordinary activity for more than four years. Richmond became the capital of the Confederate States of America on April 27, 1861. The Virginia Capitol housed both the Virginia General Assembly and the Confederate Congress.

### **Robert Edward Lee** (VS.7a–b, VUS.7b)

Robert E. Lee earned fame as the leader of Confederate forces during the Civil War, but he turned down a command in the United States military in order to come home and serve Virginia, his home state.

### **The Decision-Makers** (VS.7a, USI.9a, VUS.7a)

Students will learn about Virginians who participated in the Virginia Convention of 1861. Among the conventioners were former U.S. president **John Tyler**, and **Jubal Early**, who would earn fame as a Confederate officer. Some, like **Allen Caperton**, started off as a Unionists and later supported secession. Some, like former governor **Henry Wise**, staunchly advocated for secession. Others, like **John Carlile**, rejected secession as treason. Other conventioners featured include **Christopher Yancy Thomas**, **Governor John Letcher**, and **John Quincy Marr**.