

A County Divided

In the 1860's Fayette County was not comprised of large wealthy planters as were many of the counties to the south. Most of the population was comprised of families who years earlier had left the states of North and South Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia looking for greener pastures, coming to new territory where they could acquire land grants and start a new life. Very few were wealthy enough to own slaves.

The population of Fayette County in the 1860 census was 12,850 people. (Remember that Lamar County had not been created and was at this time part of Fayette County.) The number of slaves totaled 1,703. Thirteen percent of the population owned one or more slaves. However, sixty-three people in the county owned 51 percent of all the slaves. Therefore, those who owned no slaves greatly outnumbered those who did.

Whether the underlying issue in favor of secession was the states' rights under the Federal government, the high tariffs imposed on cotton and other products primarily produced in the south, the election of Abraham Lincoln, or the abolition of slavery, seven southern states voted to withdraw from the United States and form a confederacy of states which were not beholden to obey federal laws and regulations.

The Alabama Governor, A. B. Moore, called for an election by the people on the issue of secession from the union. Fayette Countians voted overwhelmingly to oppose secession, 1,110 against seceding and 432 for secession. On January 11, 1861, before Lincoln's inauguration, the Alabama Convention was held in Montgomery. Fayette County delegates Burr Wilson and Elliott Priest Jones voted against secession as did most of the delegates from the northern part of Alabama. However, the southern counties carried the majority and Alabama passed its Ordinance of Secession with 61 delegates voting for and 39 voting against, making Alabama the 4th out of seven southern states to initially withdraw from the Union and begin forming the Confederate States of America.

Tension was high in Fayette County and most of North Alabama. The area stayed on the brink of an internal civil war because of divided loyalties and the fear of war. Unsuccessful meetings were held all through northwest Alabama to discuss a way for those counties to remain neutral during the war.

The Congress of the Confederacy comprised of delegates from the seven states which had passed secession ordinances met in Montgomery in February of 1861. The provisional Congress sent three envoys to Washington to try to negotiate a final, peaceful split from the United States, although at the same time preparing for war by establishing an army. Hopes for a non-violent settlement died after the April 12th attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and four more southern states joined the confederacy after the war began, bringing the total to eleven states that comprised the Confederate States of America..

The Confederacy sent out a call for volunteers to enlist for a period of one year in the newly formed army. Initially, ninety-nine Fayette County men and boys volunteered and formed Company A of the 26th Alabama Infantry Regiment. A young private said in reflection, only the wisest men, those who had seen war before, imagined the war would last more than a few months." Eventually, over 600 Fayette County men and boys would serve in the Confederate army, many of those due to conscription (draft). In addition to the 26th Alabama Infantry Regiment, Fayette County men served in Alabama Infantry Regiments 11, 32, 36, 38, 41, 42, 58 along with the 5th and 8th Cavalry Regiments.

Most of the northern part of Fayette County remained loyal to the Union and refused to, "fire against the flag of our fathers". One hundred and fifteen men and boys from Fayette County joined the 1st Alabama Cavalry, U.S.A.

Before the first year of the war was over and boys and men who had volunteered into the Confederate army and were due to come home found that the Confederacy had past a Conscription Act requiring all men ages 18 to 35 to serve the Confederacy until released. The first act provided for exemptions for medical reasons and professions. It also allowed those with financial means to either pay money for an exemption or to pay for a substitution to take their place, leaving the poor to fight the war. This act was repealed late in 1863 and a revision of the draft act was passed to raise the qualifying age to 45. By early 1864 the act was changed again and called for all men between the age of 17 and 50.

When the war began, men of the Confederacy knew they were outnumbered by Union forces more than two to one, however, as many young southern soldiers believed, “one Confederate soldier could easily kill 4 Yankees,” at every encounter. The Confederate soldier who entered the war full of spirit and hope, glory and pride, enthusiasm and determination slowly became “demoralized. Sickness and disease such as measles, pneumonia, diarrhea and typhoid fever killed far more soldiers than were killed in battles. In the coming articles we will share some of the letters written by soldiers that will paint a grim picture of what these young men experienced.