

Volunteers on the Border:  
Middle Tennessee and the Road to Secession

By  
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## INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Francis Cheairs was born in 1818 at his father's homestead in Maury County, Tennessee. As he entered adulthood, he developed an affinity for farming and fishing and inherited the largest portion of his father's farmland out of all of his siblings.<sup>1</sup> In 1841, Nat married Susan McKissack, and began growing his inheritance. Between 1840 and 1850 production on the farm grew 15%. From 1850 to 1855, Nat commissioned a new house—which he named Rippavilla—including a detached kitchen, smoke house, and slave quarters. By 1860, Nat and his family lived in a 10,000-square foot home, and the value of his real estate increased by 311%. Nat existed in the generation of slave owning white farmers, who contributed to and witnessed the exponential growth of American slavery leading up to 1861.<sup>2</sup>

When President Abraham Lincoln won the election, Nat Cheairs “viewed” it “as a revolution.” Not surprisingly, the owner of seventy-five enslaved people strongly disagreed with any restrictions on the institution itself. At the same time, however, Cheairs found it “equally revolutionary” to secede from the Union. In February of 1861, “he voted against secession in the special state referendum.”<sup>3</sup> Two months later, recounted Cheairs, “President Lincoln issued his proclamation [sic] calling upon the Government for 75,000 troops to aid in coercing the States that had seceded back in the

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Francis Cheairs, *I'll Sting if I Can: The Life and Prison Letters of Major N.F. Cheairs, C.S.A.* (Sevierville: Mountain Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Brad Kinnison, “The Story of Rippavilla and the Battle of Spring Hill,” *The Dispatch* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 5-13.

<sup>3</sup> Cheairs, 5.

Union. I at once determined if I had to fight that I could not, would not fight against my own people, and immediately proceeded to raise a company for Southern defence.” He soon became a Major, but was imprisoned after the Battle of Fort Donelson in February of 1862 outside of Nashville. After his release in 1863, he chose not to rejoin his company, but wanted to continue in his effort to defend the South. He traveled Tennessee, providing food and other materials to the Confederate war effort until 1864 when he was recaptured. He returned home to Rippavilla on June 2, 1865.<sup>4</sup> Cheairs’s conflicted and shifting loyalties characterized much of Tennessee, which became the last state to secede from the Union.

Once Tennessee seceded in June of 1861, the only slave states remaining in the Union were Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware—dubbed the Border States. The border as academics define it today contains the final three states located below the Mason Dixon Line that legally allowed slavery, yet stayed in the Union. The typical definition, however, takes in no account of nuances within each slave state, frequently omits Delaware because it sat above the Mason-Dixon Line, and has left historians arguing about true or fair definitions for the past century and a half. Even though Tennessee was the last state to secede from the United States in 1861, it still seceded, which keeps the Volunteer State out of the typical border state conversation. What if the border state conversation were less “black and white?” What if historians recognized the details and nuances that highlight similarities between Tennessee and border states or that highlight differences between Tennessee and Confederate states in the deep south?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 21.

Tennessee stands out in Civil War history because it held multiple secession votes before it eventually seceded, and stood witness to a change in heart of nineteen counties.<sup>5</sup>

When these nineteen Tennessee counties flipped their votes, seventeen flipped from unionism to secessionism, with the bulk of the switch taking place in Middle Tennessee. If historians were to conceptualize Border Regions rather than all-or-nothing Border States, Middle Tennessee would more than qualify for the Border Region conversation. In order to understand these arguments, it is important to first understand Tennessee's similarities with other Border States and also the three Grand Divisions of Tennessee: West, East, and Middle Tennessee.

Politically and agriculturally, Tennessee was quite similar to border states Missouri and Kentucky. All three states had clear political and economic patterns based on their similar topography, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) zones, which informed variations in crops and involvement in slavery. In the 1860 election, four candidates ran for president: Republican Abraham Lincoln, Northern Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, Constitutional Unionist (Whig) John Bell, and Southern Democrat John C. Breckenridge. The more moderate of the four were Stephen A. Douglas and John Bell, who—not coincidentally—won Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee. Missouri was the only state in the country to vote for Douglas, while Kentucky and Tennessee were two out of the three states who voted for Bell.

Additionally, each state had pro-secession regions with extremely fertile soil, one or more mountainous or rocky regions with little involvement in slavery, and one or more

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

politically conflicted regions with characteristics of both extremes. Middle Tennessee's parallels exist in Missouri's "Little Dixie"—located in the central Great River Region—and Kentucky's Bluegrass region to the northeast, bordering Ohio. All three of these regions voted heavily for John Bell, despite fertile soil and a dependence upon slavery. West Tennessee's parallels exist in Missouri's Ozarks—to the South—and Kentucky's Jackson Purchase—to the West—as well as Eastern Kentucky's Cumberland Plateau. These four regions voted for a mix of John Bell and John Breckenridge with a heavy leaning towards the latter. Lastly, East Tennessee's parallels exist in Missouri's northern region and central Kentucky's Mississippi Plateau. These three regions all leaned more towards the political left, relative to their state: Northern Missouri saw large support for Stephen A. Douglas, while Kentucky's Mississippi Plateau and East Tennessee saw a high voter count for John Bell.



## USDA Map of Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee

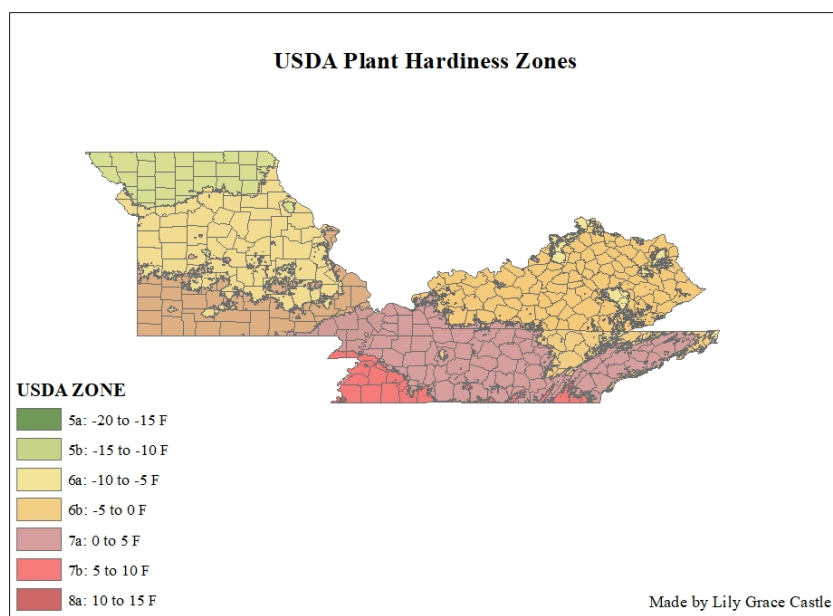


Figure 1

## Topographic Contour of Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee

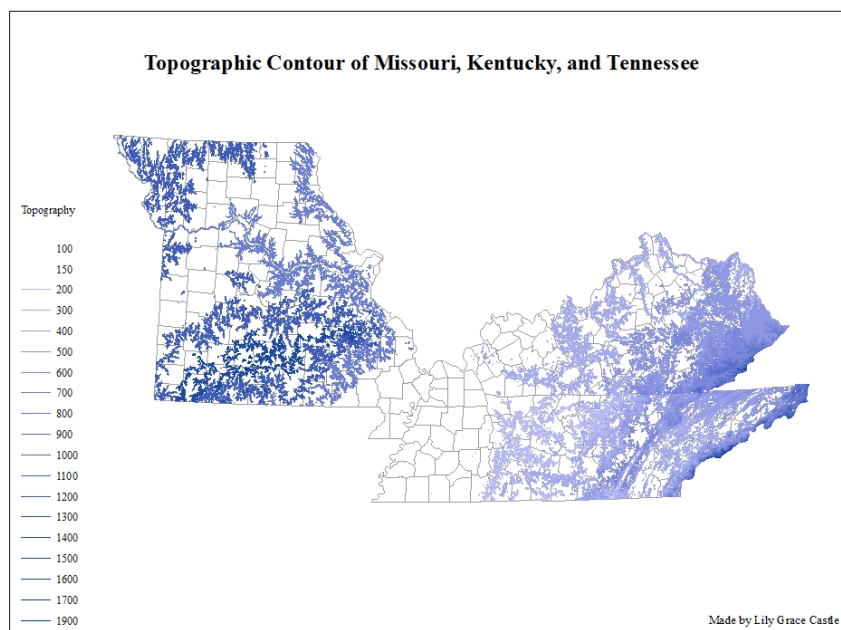


Figure 2

## 1860 Presidential Election by County

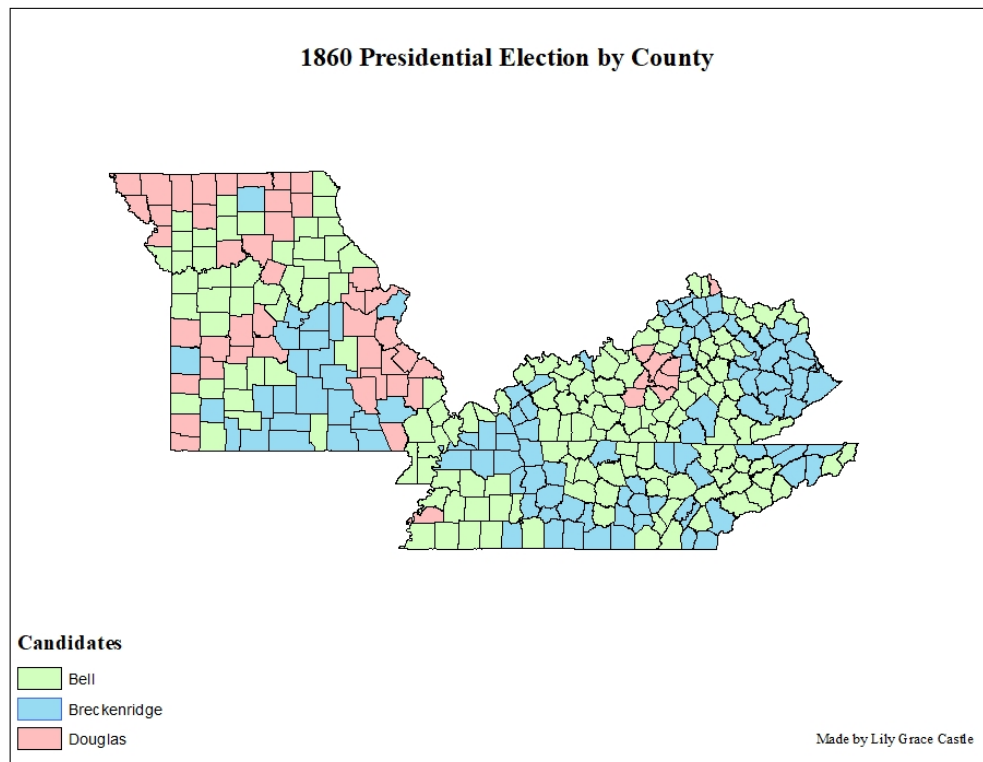


Figure 3

Tennessee was the last state to secede from the Union, and did so with plenty of inner turmoil (much like the rest of the seceded states *not* named South Carolina). Just after President Abraham Lincoln won the 1860 election, Tennessee’s most fervent secessionists—mostly in West Tennessee—began to talk about leaving the Union. These same secessionists attempted to join the first seven states that left the Union before Lincoln’s inauguration. The Volunteer State held a Secession Convention in February of 1861, which ended in a victory for the Unionists.<sup>6</sup> Four months later, Tennessee held a

<sup>6</sup> “Tennessee Vote on Secession Convention, 1861,” Vote Archive.

Secession Referendum, in which nineteen out of Tennessee's ninety-five counties flipped—enough to pull the entire state into the Confederacy.<sup>7</sup> Two counties had previously voted to secede but changed their vote to stay in the Union. Two counties in West Tennessee flipped, eleven counties in Middle Tennessee flipped, and five in East Tennessee flipped (See Figure 1).

Flipped Counties in Secession Referendum

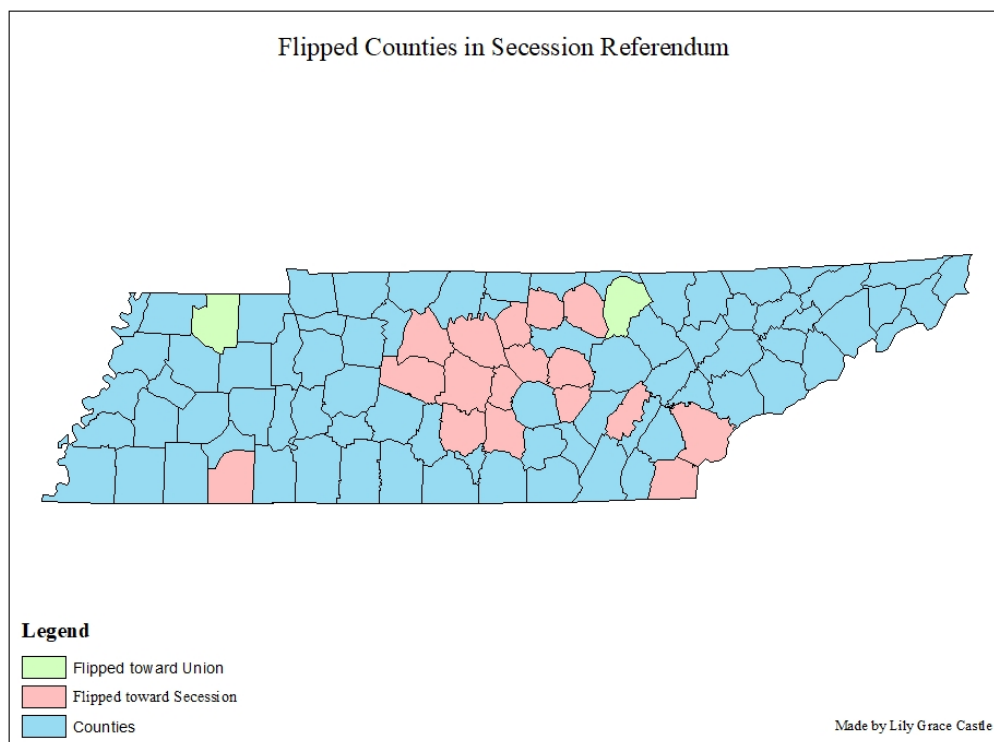


Figure 4

<sup>7</sup> "Tennessee Secession Referendum, 1861," Vote Archive.

Middle Tennessee's shift has two likely possibilities: either the region genuinely shifted in politics, or the region encountered fraud in the second election. As we go in more depth, it will become more clear that Middle Tennesseans experienced a genuine shift in their politics as the war unfolded in the Spring of 1861. To discover which possibility is more likely, we must take a fine-grained approach to investigating Middle Tennessee's conflicted and ambiguous politics throughout the beginning of the Civil War. Honing in on Middle Tennessee (see Figure 2), there is a ring of hills surrounding the Nashville Basin, which displayed typical voting patterns for Tennessee's hills and mountains. The counties left are Davidson, Williamson, Maury, Rutherford, Bedford, and Marshall, which display similar land and voting patterns. This thesis focuses on the secession crisis in Davidson, Williamson, and Maury counties because Davidson and Williamson counties both flipped from Unionist to secessionist in the Referendum of June of 1861 while Maury county voted in both elections to secede. Furthermore, Franklin was a small town located out in the country where many wealthy families owned summer homes while Nashville was a growing trade hub and city.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## Topographic Contour of Tennessee

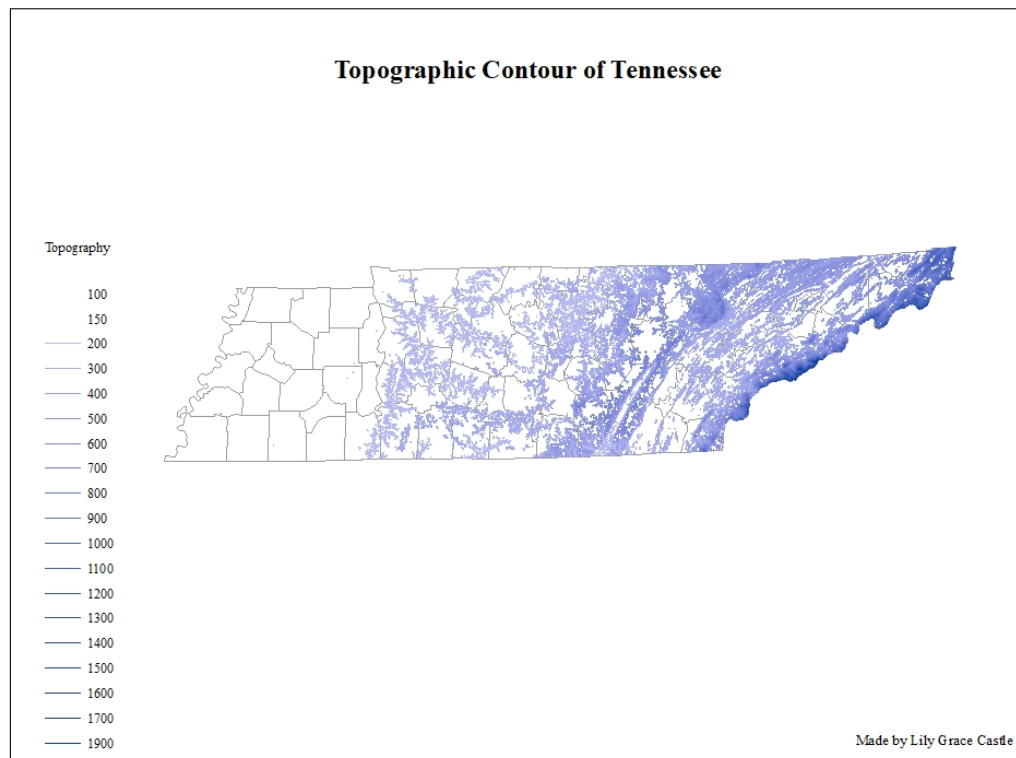


Figure 5

Political histories and community studies used to dominate the Border State historiography. The conversation has become more nuanced, especially over the last few decades. Pre-war border states have begun to include Missouri and Kentucky, as well as Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Richard Heath Dabney and Michael K. Brantley, argue that Virginia and North Carolina waited to secede because they knew a war would be waged in their states, ravaging the local infrastructure and population.<sup>9</sup> Missouri and Kentucky, Aaron Astor argues, may have had that issue in mind to a degree,

<sup>9</sup> Richard Heath Dabney, "Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession," *The Sewanee Review* 18, no. 2 (1910): 233-39; Michael K. Brantley, *Galvanized: The Odyssey of a Reluctant Carolina Confederate* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).

but the majority of scholarship holds that they stayed in the Union truly due to political beliefs—that preservation of the Union is the key to the preservation of the Institution of Slavery.<sup>10</sup> Nat Cheairs serves as a particular example of a pre-war Unionist who sought to remain in the Union due to his beliefs that abolitionism as well as secession were quite extreme stances. Like Cheairs, Middle Tennesseans' Unionism followed by almost resounding secessionism proves that Middle Tennessee deserves its own conversation as a border region in microcosm.

For instance, Aaron Astor's *Rebels on the Border* is a clear and thorough example of political scholarship in the western border states. Astor maintains that scholars must understand the politics of Missouri and Kentucky to understand these border states at all during the Civil War era. While Civil War historians frequently focus on one side or the other, they usually forget how much of a mix the border was. Border politics in Missouri and Kentucky truly encompassed a blend of Northern and Southern politics; yet, while Astor clearly made an effort to focus on the western border states, his same argument could apply to Tennessee. Before the start of the war, all three states disagreed with secession and abolitionism, yet also agreed with the preservation of slavery as well as the preservation of the Union.<sup>11</sup>

Richard Heath Dabney's "Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession" argues that most Virginians hesitated to secede until President Abraham Lincoln ordered troops in South Carolina in April of 1861. While Dabney explored why Old Dominion hesitated to secede, Aaron Sheehan-Dean explored why Virginia fought at all. Sheehan-

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<sup>10</sup> Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Astor.

Dean argues that, at the end of the day, Confederate Virginians fought for Confederate nationalism as well as for their privilege as white men, superior to Black people and women.<sup>12</sup>

Tennesseans shared anxieties with these two groups: some worried about the war coming to their doorstep (indeed, Tennessee—along with Missouri and Kentucky—hosted the war’s most violence) and some wanted to preserve the Union as well as slavery. Conventional Civil War historiography so often includes or focuses on Virginia. As scholarship evolves away from the conventional historiography of the war and leans more towards guerrilla warfare and federal occupation, our geographic attention should evolve as well. Tennessee’s story up to their involvement in the Civil War informs historians of what really mattered to the citizens of the Volunteer State.<sup>13</sup>

Civil War Tennessee’s historiography pales in comparison to that of other Upper South states, notably Virginia. James L. McDonough’s “Tennessee and the Civil War” explains Tennessee’s broad history in the war, but Tennessee’s nuanced politics is barely a footnote. *War at Every Door* by Noel C. Fisher examines the political differences between East Tennessee’s hills and hollers. Jonathan D. Sarris takes a broader approach in *A Separate Civil War*. Sarris explains the differences, politically and militarily, among the hills and hollers of Appalachia as a whole. Richard J. M. Blackett examines full anti-slavery politics as he uncovers an Underground Railroad in Middle Tennessee in the 1850s in “Resistance to Slavery in Middle Tennessee.”

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<sup>12</sup>Dabney; Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion by Frederick H. Dyer*, (Tamarac: THA New Media LLC, 2016).

In *Sister States, Enemy States*, Derek Frisby's essay, "The Vortex of Secession," offers an answer to why Tennessee flipped between its two votes by citing peer pressure, and theories of fraud and coercion to flip Tennessee in its second vote. Frisby mentions the story of a man named Meredith Gentry and his path from unionism to secessionism. When he realized that he was in such a grave minority in his unionist beliefs, he said "Hold on! Hold on! I'll get aboard too and we'll all go to hell together!" Frisby goes further, mentioning "reports of 'mob action' or isolated acts of violence against those brave enough to voice their contrary opinions or those thought to be acting suspiciously soon filled the local papers," and "Secessionists ensured that the June 8 vote would not lead to another embarrassment. Again violence and intimidation were their primary tools." He employs more context to Tennessean politics by using John Bell's victory in Tennessee in the 1860 presidential election, and a "wait-and-see" approach to Lincoln's victory in the election. The "wait-and-see" approach gave Lincoln the benefit of the doubt, believing that the Constitution would protect their property (i.e. slaves) from the new Republican administration. Leading up to the second vote in June of 1861, Frisby examines the efficacy of the Unionist and Secessionist campaigns, and came to the conclusion that the Secessionist campaign persuaded more voters. Finally, Frisby makes his argument clear in his conclusion, in which he connects Tennessee's secession with coercion and intimidation exported from West Tennessee. As interesting of a theory as Frisby proposes, it is unlikely that the one region with a secessionist majority influenced



seventeen counties by the second election. We will dissect this article further in Chapter two.<sup>14</sup>

Mary Emily Robertson Campbell's *The Attitudes of Tennesseans Towards the Union, 1847-61* dives into the fourteen years before Tennessee's secession elections. Robertson Campbell suggests that Tennessee's change could have been due to their staunchly moderate or center-right politics. Tennesseans paid special attention to native Tennessean, Andrew Johnson as well as President Lincoln himself. The media of Tennessee began to ask troublesome questions, as they published Johnson's speeches, that the Republican Party misunderstood their February election: either the Republicans had conquered Tennessee, or Tennessee truly wanted to keep the Union intact. At the same time, Tennesseans began to worry how far President Lincoln intended to take his effort to put down the rebellion. They worried that he would misuse the Constitution, as he spoke about the possibility of taking Southern forts and making money off of them. Many Tennesseans believed that act would be unconstitutional, and would warrant a defense of the South.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Derek W. Frisby, "The Vortex of Secession: West Tennessee and the Rush to War," *Sister States, Enemy States: The Civil War in Kentucky and Tennessee*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 46-71.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Emily Robertson Campbell, *Attitudes of Tennesseans Toward the Union, 1847-61*, (New York, Vantage Press: 1963), 181.

## CHAPTER ONE

In order to understand the world as Nat saw it, we must first assess what created the world he lived in. When the Founding Fathers failed to agree upon how to address slavery in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, they essentially left it alone to be the problem of another generation. When the North American British Colonies finally broke away from England to create the United States, people began to wonder how Americans could be free but hold thousands—eventually millions—of people in slavery. The rich aristocrats who owned slaves became richer on the backs of people they held in bondage, allowing the enslavers to purchase more enslaved people, and therefore gain even more wealth. It was a constant cycle that not only benefitted the richest Americans; it benefitted the merchants who relied on farms and plantations’ production in order to have product to sell; it benefitted insurance companies who insured slaves should they run away or die; it benefitted cities and churches, as they took advantage of free labor to build churches, government buildings, and roads. This slave labor economy did not stop at the Mason Dixon line. This economy benefitted textile factories in the North who purchased cotton from farms like Nat’s in Maury County, Tennessee. With all of this money, as well as an entire human race to subjugate or look down upon, this was not an institution that could phase out easily. Slavery was a Southern institution but an American problem. In 1820, Founding Father Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to a friend, John Holmes, saying, “as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” Jefferson fully understood how evil slavery was, yet how

impossible it may have felt, to do the right thing and let it go. Due to this dilemma that slavery posed to the United States, something massive had to happen in order to end the peculiar institution. Many Southerners, however, believed that it was an institution that would never die, and they intended to expand it throughout the entire North American continent. As the United States expanded west, and as Northern states banned slavery one after another, the question of how to keep expanding slavery lurked behind every Southern politician's move. The North and South came to a compromise in 1820 that drew a line west from the northern border of Arkansas and Oklahoma, which acted as a border between free and slave territory. When the compromise added Missouri and Maine into the Union, politicians dubbed this bill the Missouri Compromise. The Compromise was simply a temporary fix for a much bigger, deeper problem.<sup>16</sup>

In 1844, an expansionist Democrat, James Knox Polk, from Maury County, Tennessee, was elected president. Historians argue as to why President Polk pushed to expand west; however, one of the more popular theories claims that the President wanted to accrue more farmland for future generations of planters. After all, many facets of the antebellum Southern economy required access to new lands. William Disinger's *Slavemaster President* argues that President Polk and his policies were a product of his Middle Tennessean upbringing as well as the plantation he owned in Mississippi. Polk had designated his Mississippi plantation—named Polk Place—as his place of retirement, which accrued enough income to last him the rest of his life. Subsequently, President

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<sup>16</sup> Tom Downey, *Planting a Capitalist South: Masters, Merchants and Manufacturers in the Southern Interior, 1790-1860*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009); Paul Leicester Ford, ed, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 12*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), 159; "Missouri Compromise: Letters to James Barbour, Senator of Virginia in the Congress of the United States," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1901): 5–24.

Polk wanted to admit Texas to the Union as well as the entirety of Mexico. At the time, Mexico stretched from its current southern border all the way to the northernmost border of modern day California. Within the modern day United States, Mexico had stretched from California's west coast to the border of the Louisiana Purchase. According to Dusiaberre's *Slavemaster President*, Polk's decision to admit Texas to the Union and expand west via war with Mexico caused a rift between northern and southern Whigs. Northern Whigs wanted to leave Mexico alone, while Southern Whigs had more mixed feelings towards invasion. President Polk went to war with Mexico nevertheless.<sup>17</sup>

On the outset of the war, B. H. Gilley's *Tennessee Whigs and the Mexican War* differs a bit from Dusiaberre. Gilley maintains that the Northern and Southern Whigs remained unified on the issue of Polk's invasion of Mexico. Tennessean Whigs, however, joined the Army against Mexico in droves. Nashville's *Republican Banner* claimed that the Whigs merely acted upon patriotism rather than any actualized support of Polk's expansion. Further, Tennessean Whigs Meredith P. Gentry, Edwin H. Ewing and Milton Brown claimed that the President's actions were unconstitutional, as Congress has the responsibility to approve wars, and that Polk overstepped his boundaries by leading a war into another country. Many Tennesseans fought in the War in Mexico anyway in order to support the United States with a "get it over with" mentality. Where Tennessee Whigs followed President Polk into Texas—albeit kicking and screaming—Northern Whigs fervently spoke out against the invasion. After three years of war, and

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<sup>17</sup> William J. Cooper, *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 249; William Dusiaberre, *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James Polk*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3; Cooper, 216.

Polk managed to take 529,000 square miles from Texas, achieving America's third largest land acquisition behind the Louisiana Purchase and the purchase of Alaska.<sup>18</sup>

With the acquisition of such a massive amount of land, America witnessed a further complication of politics. The Compromise of 1850 drew a wedge between Northern and Southern Whigs. The Compromise meant to continue the Missouri Compromise into the newly acquired Mexican territory, as well as a stricter enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, and a prohibition of the sale of slaves in Washington D. C. Further, the Compromise did not explicitly allow slavery in the Mexican territory, nor did it prohibit it. This infuriated many Northern Whigs as it became clearer that the party would split over the expansion, management, and regulation of slavery. After President Millar Fillmore signed the Compromise into law, many Northern Whigs ran into the arms of the Free-Soil Party, which would later identify as the Republican Party. Two years later, in the election of 1852, the fall of the Whig Party came to fruition. Franklin Pierce ran on the Democratic ticket, while Winfield Scott ran on the Whig ticket. Pierce supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would allow residents of new states decide whether slavery will be legal. Alternatively, Winfield Scott held anti-slavery values that only won him four states. Interestingly, Tennessee voted for the anti-slavery Mexican War General. The majority of his support in Tennessee, however, came from Middle and

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<sup>18</sup> B. H. Gilley, "Tennessee Whigs and the Mexican War," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1981): 46–67; *Republican Banner*, 29 May 1846; Dusinger, 3; George Lockhart Reaves, *The United States and Mexico, 1821-1848: A History of the Relations Between the Two Countries from the Independence of Mexico to the Close of the War with the United States*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1913).

East Tennessee. Franklin Pierce won the presidency by a landslide, defeating Scott to an embarrassing degree, and proving the fracture and fall of the Whig party.<sup>19</sup>

Two years later, President Franklin Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law. Dusinger argues that Whigs regarded Democrats as reckless expansionists who deliberately ignored the northern anti-slavery sentiment. The Democrats had essentially repealed and replaced the Missouri Compromise. Almost immediately, an organic form of civil war began to erupt in Kansas as settlers from the far right and far left of the political spectrum flooded Kansas, attempting to take the territory for their political party.<sup>20</sup>

Two years later, in 1856, three separate political parties nominated a candidate for president. The Democrats nominated the victor, President James Buchanan. The Whig party officially split along the Mason Dixon line, and the Northern Whig Party reemerged as the Know Nothing Party. The Know Nothings nominated former President Millard Fillmore as candidate. The third party was a Republican: John C. Fremont. Buchanan's administration became occupied with an economic recession, and many of the issues surrounding the expansion of slavery had gone to the backburner in Washington<sup>21</sup>.

Four years later, the election of 1860 only re-enflamed the issue of the expansion of slavery. The Democrats imploded upon themselves and nominated two presidential candidates: Stephen Douglas, the Northern Democrat, and expansionist John Breckenridge, the Southern Democrat. While a Northern Whig ran in 1856, an

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<sup>19</sup> William E. Gienapp, "The Whig Party, the Compromise of 1850, and the Nomination of Winfield Scott," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1984): 399–415; "A Continent Divided: The U.S.-Mexico War. Winfield Scott," University of Texas Arlington Library; "1852," Geoelections.

<sup>20</sup> Dusinger, 167-8.

<sup>21</sup> Eugene Roseboom, *A History of Presidential Elections*, (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 1957).

effectively Southern Whig ran in 1860. The official name for the Southern Whig party became the Constitutional Unionist Party. The new party nominated Tennessean John Bell, who carried Tennessee. Lastly, the Republican Party sent another nominee to the election, Abraham Lincoln. Pertaining to the politicization of slavery and its expansion, each of these four candidates demonstrated varying opinions. Breckenridge aligned with the expansionists, similar to President James K. Polk; Stephen Douglas believed that the decision to expand slavery belonged to the states, not the federal government; John Bell opposed any expansion of slavery into the western territories. Lastly, Abraham Lincoln disagreed with slavery on a moral and economic level, though he had no plans to terminate the institution until 1862. As a presidential candidate, he simply wanted the decision to remain in the hands of the federal government <sup>22</sup>.

Democratic West Tennessee supported secession while Whiggish East Tennessee largely rejected secession—so much so that the eastern region made multiple attempts to secede from Tennessee during the war.<sup>23</sup> Comparing a USDA map of Tennessee versus a voting map from the secession convention of February of 1861, the two maps begin to look quite similar. West Tennessee had extremely fertile soil atop relatively flat land, allowing for a successful agrarian economy built upon slave labor. East Tennessee, however, consisted of more hilly terrain. While many East Tennesseans did own slaves, less people owned slaves, and enslavers generally owned less slaves compared to the rest of Tennessee.<sup>24</sup> Caught between two ends of the agricultural and political spectrums,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “Tennessee Secession Referendum, 1861”; Charles F. Bryan, “A Gathering of Tories: The East Tennessee Convention of 1861,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1980): 27–48.

<sup>24</sup> *Ambient Air Monitoring Plan*, Environmental Protection Agency, 2010; Frisby, 49.

Whiggish Middle Tennessee sought to preserve the Union as well as the Institution of slavery.<sup>25</sup> The situation in which Middle Tennessee found itself created the same political formula that birthed the concept of the Border State.

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<sup>25</sup> Robertson Campbell.



## USDA Plant Hardiness Zones

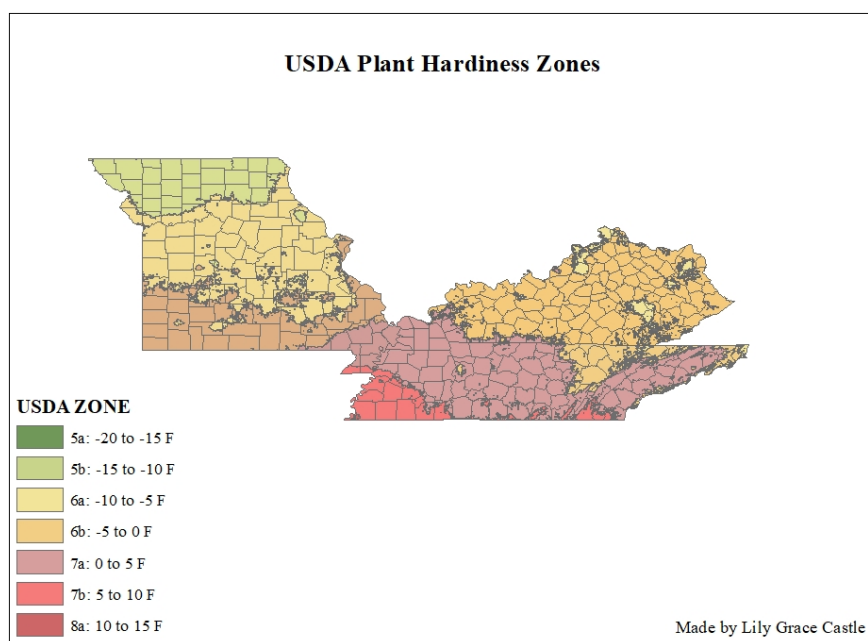


Figure 1-1a

Secession Convention, February 1861

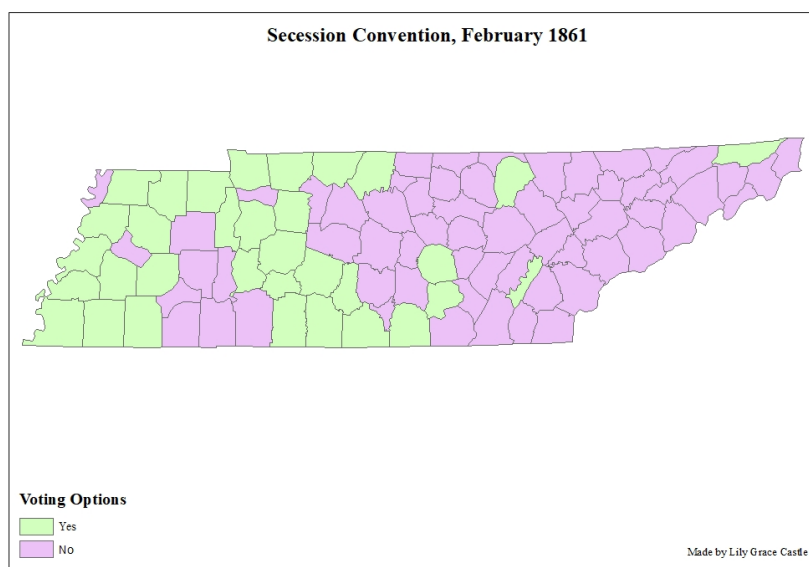


Figure 1-1b

To understand anything about Tennessee politics, one must understand its geographic and political variations. Tennessee spans across 432 miles, two time zones, and includes six USDA hardiness zones, which decodes the coldest possible temperature in any given region. Each of the Volunteer State's grand divisions contain its own variations. West Tennessee borders the Mississippi River, providing the region with incredibly fertile soil. Leading up to the Civil War, West Tennessee contained the state's highest slave populations. Due to such a slave-based economy, West Tennessee supported the Confederacy the most out of Tennessee's three regions. This is not to say that Middle Tennessee had any shortage of slavery. Williamson County, just south of Nashville, had the second-highest slave population in the state as of 1860. The crops in Middle Tennessee, however, varied greatly from those in West Tennessee. Middle Tennessee did not grow nearly as much cotton as West Tennessee did due to the limestone two to three feet below the topsoil. The Mid-State has more agricultural similarities with Kentucky, in that it is a breadbasket rather than a proponent of King Cotton. This region contained many grain-based farms as well as livestock farms. Every horse to win the Kentucky Derby since Secretariat can trace their lineage back to the Belle Meade Plantation in Nashville, which functioned primarily as a livestock or horse farm. The state's capital was a booming, metropolitan area, full of trade and educated citizens. Many in the area hoped to preserve slavery as well as preserve the Union. The Mid-State likely housed many Jacksonian Democrats, as Old Hickory lived in the Hermitage, just east of the capital. East Tennessee is the outlier in the group. There is a lot of variation between the hills and the hollers of East Tennessee, but, in general, the region's

inhabitants farmed mostly for subsistence. Most East Tennessean families who owned slaves did not own nearly as many as other families in the state. The Smoky Mountains and the Appalachian Mountains both run through East Tennessee, creating a mountainous region, unfit for grand scale farming. The lack of grand scale farming led to a smaller number of slaves, which had a serious effect on politics compared to the rest of the state. Many East Tennesseans may have felt that they did not have a horse in this race and did not care enough about slavery and its social ramifications, at least not enough to go to war for it. Once Tennessee seceded, East Tennessee tried to secede from Tennessee and rejoin the Union.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kristi Farrow, Eric A. Jacobson, "The McGavock and Carter Farms Prior to the Civil War," *Battlefield Dispatch*, (Spring 2019).

### Slaves Owned in Tennessee, 1860

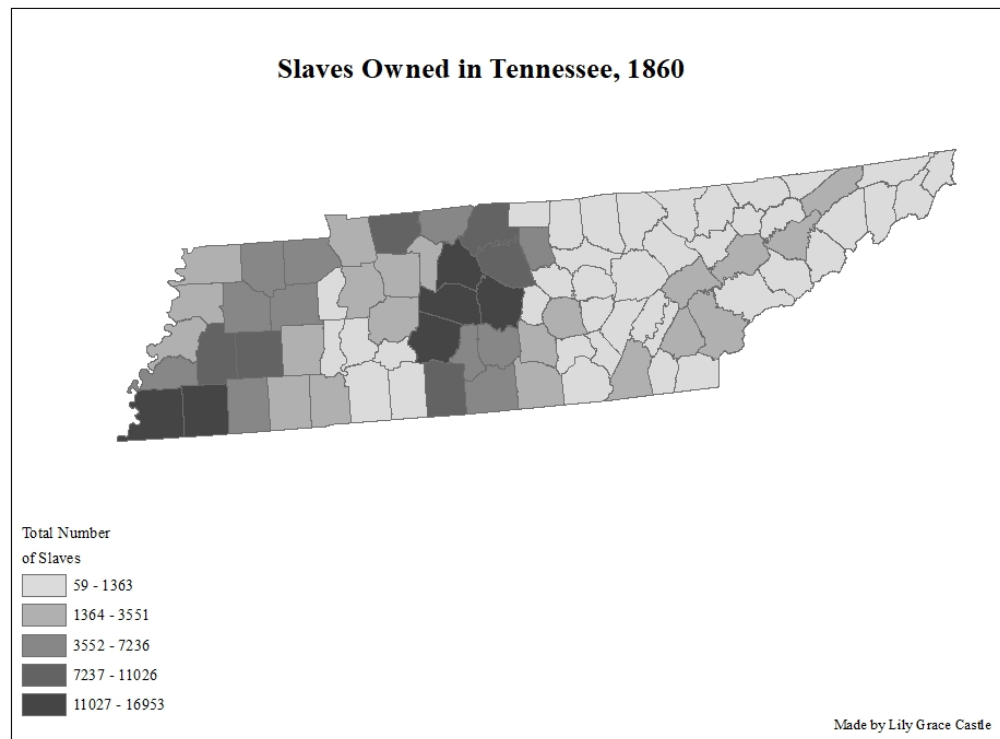


Figure 1-2

In general, the three main regions heavily affected Tennessee's politics, but they do not speak enough about the seventeen specific counties who changed their vote between February and June of 1861. Each specific topographic and agricultural nuance affected each specific county. There are seven different topographical regions in the Volunteer State. West Tennessee includes the Alluvial Plain along the Mississippi River, followed by the Inner Coastal Plain, which extends to the western border of Middle Tennessee. The outer ring of Middle Tennessee consists of the Highland Rim, essentially a ring of hills around the modern-day Nashville Metro area, which is considered the Nashville Basin. Western East Tennessee is located on the Cumberland Plateau, while the Ridge

and Valley region begins along the Appalachian Mountains and almost stretches to Tennessee's eastern border. The Smoky Mountains sit just west of Tennessee's easternmost border.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ambient Air Monitoring Plan.*

### Topographic Contour of Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee

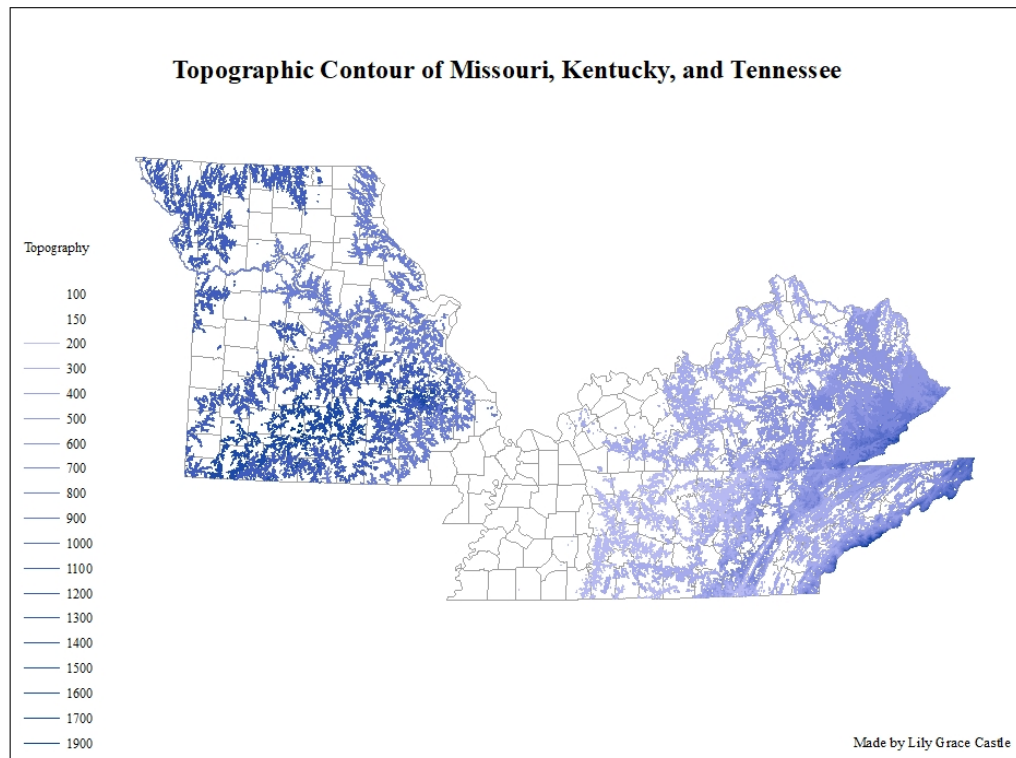


Figure 1-3

These seventeen counties in question, from West to East, include Weakley, Davidson, Williamson, Wilson, Rutherford, Bedford, Smith, DeKalb, Cannon, Coffee, Jackson, Overton, White, Van Buren, Rhea, Polk, and Monroe.

In order to fit ninety-five counties into seven sub-regions, some counties are bound to lie upon multiple zones at once, leading to agricultural, cultural, and, likely, political variations within those counties. On the eastern edge of Middle Tennessee, Overton, White, and Van Buren counties all lay on both the Highland Rim as well as the Cumberland Plateau. In East Tennessee, Rhea County lays briefly on the Cumberland

Plateau, but consists more so of the Ridge and Valley region; and, Polk and Monroe Counties lay on both the Ridge and Valley region as well as the Smoky Mountain region. While land and agriculture may have caused these six counties to vote inconsistently, eleven other counties changed their votes even though they lay on consistent ground. In West Tennessee, McNairy County lays on the consistent Inner Coastal Plain. In Middle Tennessee, counties of Davidson, Williamson, Wilson, Rutherford, Bedford, and Smith sit in the Nashville Basin, while DeKalb, Cannon, Coffee, and Jackson Counties sit on the Highland Rim.<sup>28</sup>

Just as the land in Tennessee affected its politics, land also affected politics in other Border States. In proving that Middle Tennessee was a border region, it is helpful to delve into land and politics in bordering Missouri and Kentucky. The agricultural makeup and performance of the land in all three states affected the economy, as well as how society relates to the economy, which affect social hierarchies and standards of living, which then affect politics. In Missouri's Ozark Highlands, located in the southern central section of the state, Missourians voted almost exclusively for Breckenridge, the Southern Democrat. The rest of the state is a solid mix of Bell voters—Whig/Constitutional Unionist candidate—and Douglas voters—Northern Democrat. In Kentucky, the Bluegrass region in the northeast, as well as the Jackson Purchase in the southwest have a heavy Breckenridge presence, while the rest of the state voted mostly for Bell. According to Aaron Astor's *Rebels on the Border*, Missouri's Ozarks, or Little Dixie, and Kentucky's Bluegrass regions were the areas with the most pro-Confederate

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

presence. These areas attempted votes to secede from the Union and produced a large number of Confederate regiments.<sup>29</sup>

#### 1860 Presidential Election by County

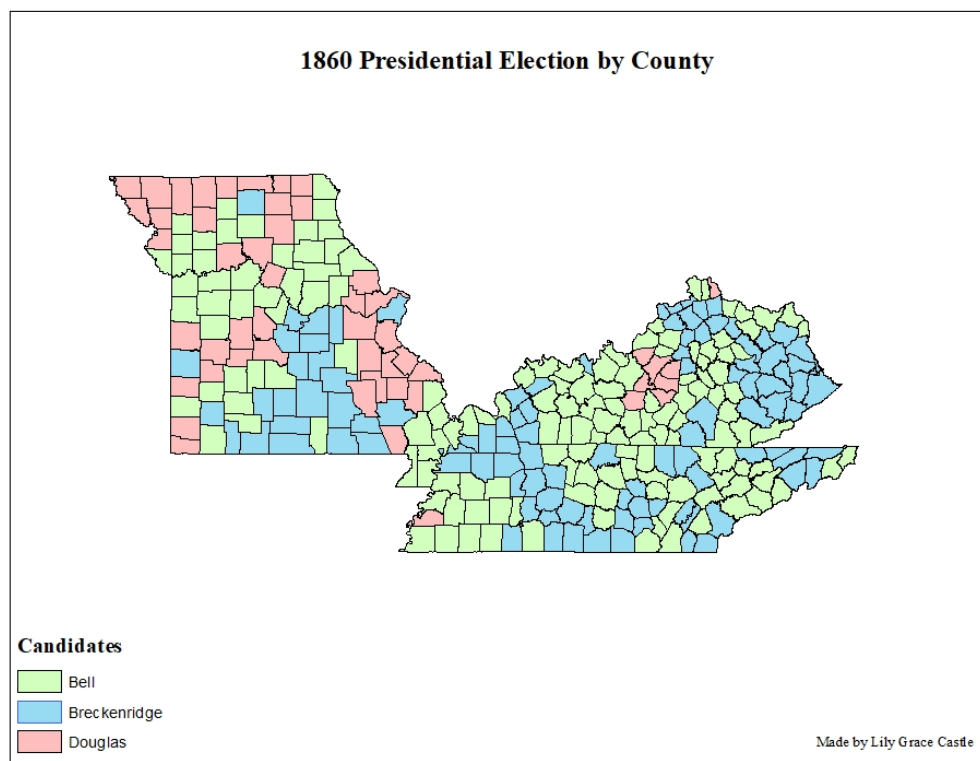


Figure 1-4

Missouri contains five USDA zones, the coldest of which sits in the top third of the state and mostly voted for Northern Democrat, Stephen Douglas, and Whig John Bell. The other two-thirds of the state, known as Little Dixie, have warmer USDA zones and had a higher Breckenridge voter presence. The southernmost section of Missouri is

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Guccione, "Quaternary Sediments and Their Weathering History in Northcentral Missouri," *Boreas*, (September 1983); Astor; Robertson Campbell, 180.



known as the Boot Heel, which borders Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Kentucky, by contract, has only three USDA zones. To the northeast, Kentucky's Bluegrass region sits on in a moderate climate amid the Kentucky and Licking Rivers. To the west, Kentucky's Jackson Purchase sits in a warmer climate, bordering Missouri's Boot Heel as well as West Tennessee. The extremely fertile, Mighty Mississippi River runs on the border between these three regions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map: Missouri," Agricultural Research Service, Oregon State University; "USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map: Kentucky," Agricultural Research Service, Oregon State University; "1860," Geoelections.

### Topographic Contour of Missouri

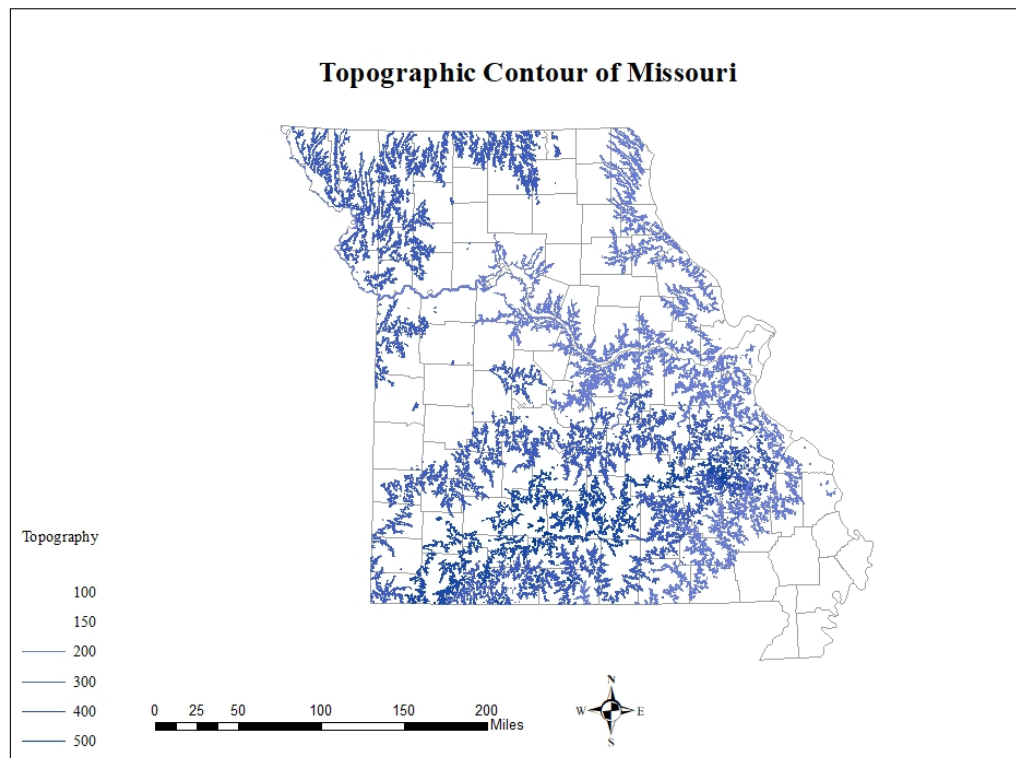


Figure 1-5

Missouri held a secession vote in late February of 1861. Ninety-eight out of ninety-nine delegates voted to stay in the Union. The onset of the war in April of 1861 as well as Lincoln's call for all Union states to supply troops complicated the views of the Show-Me State. The next week, a secessionist militia attacked a U.S. arsenal in Missouri, prompting a Federal presence. Throughout the secession crisis, Missouri invoked the Crittenden Compromise. This political theory attempted to strike a happy medium that would restore the Union and maintain slavery. It proposed to nullify the Kansas-Nebraska Act and restore the Missouri Compromise. Effectively, this compromise would limit slavery to spread south of the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel. The compromise could have garnered

more national popularity had one of its clauses not prevented any amendments. Missouri, however, still failed to unite even under the most moderate compromise. Secessionist governor Claiborne Fox Jackson still demanded secession. He created the Neosho Act, which essentially declared independence from the United States. This act, however, baffles historians to this day, as it never got far enough to achieve secession; it also hit quite a road block when John C. Fremont declared a brief martial law in the Show-Me state. Due to such chaotic political disunity, Missouri had a heavy military presence on both sides throughout the rest of the war, and received sovereign recognition from the Confederate States of America.<sup>31</sup>

Kentucky attempted to secede as well in August of 1861. Later that year, Kentucky developed two different governments within the capitol of Frankfort, one that was pro-Union and one that was pro-Secession. The Confederate States of America, of course, recognized the pro-Secession faction of the Kentucky government, while the United States of America regarded Kentucky as wholly in the Union.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Journal and Proceedings of the Missouri State Convention Held at Jefferson City and St. Louis, March 1861*, (George Knapp & Co., 1861), 36.; Eugene Morrow Violette, *A History of Missouri*, (California: D.C. Heath & Co., 1918); Jason Roe, "Missouri Rejects Secession," The Kansas City Public Library; "Secession Acts of the Thirteen Confederate States," American Battlefield Trust.

<sup>32</sup> Lowell Hayes Harrison, "George W. Johnson and Richard Hawes: The Governors of Confederate Kentucky," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, (1981).

### Topographic Contour of Kentucky

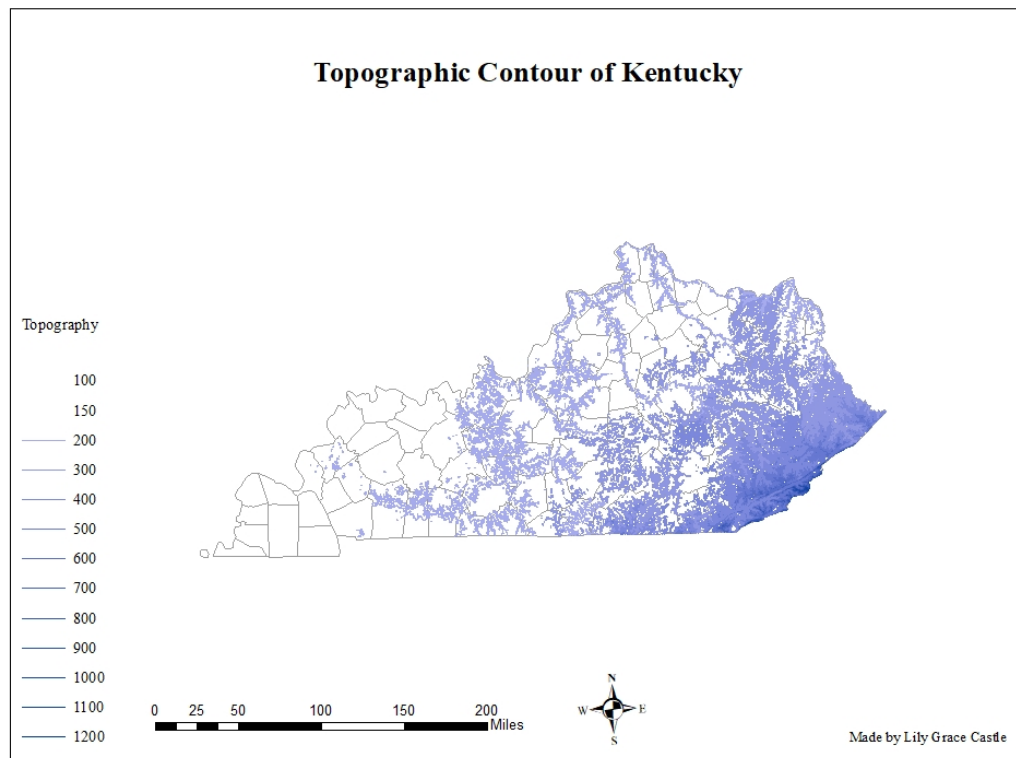


Figure 1-6

Tennessee's predicament was very similar to that of Kentucky during the war. A great example of this parallel lies in Patrick Lewis' *For Slavery and Union*. Civil War soldier, Benjamin Buckner, fought the first two years of the Civil War on the side of the United States. When President Abraham Lincoln released his Emancipation Proclamation, Buckner felt betrayed. He had joined the United States Army to keep his country from falling apart. At the same time, however, he wanted to preserve slavery as well. Lewis makes it abundantly clear that Buckner did not join the Union due to any apathy towards slavery; he joined the Union because he, like many other Whigs and

moderates, believed that the preservation of slavery had to begin with the preservation of the Union.<sup>33</sup>

While Unionists remained the official majority in Missouri and Kentucky, Tennessee's unionism waned as President Lincoln called for troops. East Tennessee, however, remained intensely unionist with voices such as William Gannaway "Parson" Brownlow. Parson Brownlow, owner of multiple newspapers in Knoxville, and governor of Tennessee during Reconstruction had no reservations about sharing his political opinions in his publications. Loud and unfiltered, he provided an extremely moderate voice in East Tennessee, and in Tennessee as a whole. Brownlow predicted that the majority of the war would be waged in the border states, which he identified as Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri. He went on to predict that many of the secessionists in the deep South would not see war on their soil, as they would be protected behind civil positions and military officer ranks, all while taxing their citizens relentlessly.<sup>34</sup> All within the same issue of *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig*, Brownlow exhibited both optimism, pessimism, as well as anger. He lashed out at the Democrats, arguing that they had caused "all this mischief." He alluded to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed states and territories to choose whether or not to legalize slavery in their state. Brownlow's argument, then, is that the Democrats got greedy, wanted to grow their empires, and bit off more than they could chew. When the rest of

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, 2

<sup>34</sup> William Gannaway Brownlow, "The Fruits of Disunion," *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig*, 17 November 1860.

the country did not react in a favorable way towards the Democrats, they decided to leave, causing massive problems for the rest of the country.<sup>35</sup>

Traditionally, historians define a Border State as a slave state who did not secede leading up to or during the Civil War. Border States traditionally encompass Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland. Even though Delaware still legalized slavery but did not leave the Union, historians frequently ignore it. This study aims to prove that Middle Tennessee is a border state in microcosm—a border region.

In February 1861, Tennessee governor and secessionist Democrat, Isham Harris, held a vote on whether to hold a Secession Convention. Unionists held a majority, keeping Tennessee in the Union. By March of that year, seven states had seceded from the Union. Most of them cited their concerns with the United States presenting hostilities toward the institution of slavery. For example, Mississippi's justified its actions by saying "[o]ur position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world. ... [Slave-grown] products have become necessities of the world, and a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization."<sup>36</sup> Deep South states were not appeased with Lincoln's promise that he held "no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists."<sup>37</sup> Slavery's unchecked expansion dictated secession.

President Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops in April 1861 after a South Carolina militia fired shots at U.S. soldiers at Fort Sumter pushed Tennessee away from neutrality.

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<sup>35</sup> William Gannaway Brownlow, "Which is the Negro Party?" *Brownlow's Knoxville Whig*, 17 November 1860.

<sup>36</sup> "Confederate States of America: Mississippi Secession," Lillian Golden Law Library, Yale Law School.

<sup>37</sup> "First Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln," Lillian Goldman Yale Library, Yale Law School.

Again, Middle Tennesseans determined the state's fate. In June 1861, nineteen counties flipped (seventeen in favor of joining the Confederacy) at a second vote whether to have a Secession Convention.

Up to this point, Tennessee did not have a problem forming alliances with anti-slavery candidates such as Winfield Scott. The people of Tennessee must have felt something so severe in the spring of 1861 for the majority of the state to end their affiliation with moderate politics, and join hands with pro-secession, expansionist Southern Democrats, who the Volunteers had rivaled with since President Polk's expansion into Texas.

So far in this chapter, Tennessee has proven its track record to side with moderation and compromise in politics. The Volunteer State remained in the middle of the road politically for such a long time, until they felt that neutrality was impossible.

## CHAPTER TWO

Several historians, specifically Derek W. Frisby, have attempted to explain why Tennessee as a whole switched from Unionist to Secessionist in 1861. Frisby assesses multiple reasons for the switch. He looks into peer pressure, but makes the point that peer pressure alone would not have created such a dramatic shift.<sup>38</sup> Frisby also entertains coercion and intimidation at the polls at the second vote to keep Unionists from voting.<sup>39</sup> This claim is difficult to prove. Only one county (Jackson County) presented more votes than its male voting age population in 1860.<sup>40</sup> Further, only three counties (Franklin, Humphreys, and Lincoln) presented zero votes against secession in June of 1861. It is worth mentioning that Franklin, Humphreys and Lincoln did not flip their votes between the two elections. Nineteen counties presented less than 5% against secession in June of 1861, many of whom did not flip their votes. Four out of these nineteen had flipped between the two elections: Coffee, Rutherford, Van Buren, and Williamson.<sup>41</sup> It is worth further examination whether coercion played a role in these four counties, but only five fraudulent counties out of the nineteen flipped counties will not influence the election dramatically enough to claim that fraud flipped Tennessee. Most of the nineteen flipped counties experienced up to a 10% increase or decrease in voter turnout between February and June of 1861, which does sound natural between any two votes on one matter. Frisby also claims that South Carolinians came to West Tennessee to campaign for secession as

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<sup>38</sup> Frisby, 46.

<sup>39</sup> Frisby, 62-65.

<sup>40</sup> "Population of the United States in 1860: Tennessee," Census.gov: 456-459.

<sup>41</sup> "Tennessee Vote on Secession Convention, 1861."; "Tennessee Secession Referendum, 1861."



soon as President Lincoln won the election of 1860. That likely swayed some voters, but the focus on West Tennessee does not make a lot of sense. To be sure, Frisby claims that West Tennessee flipped before the first election in February, and that West Tennesseans campaigned throughout Middle Tennessee to flip that region for the election in June. While Frisby uses a lot of diaries and letters to prove his point, newspapers provide a stronger case for Middle Tennessee's reason to flip. Letters and diaries will provide a case by case scenario, but they do not prove a shift in larger amounts of people. Nashville politically moderate newspapers specifically switch their opinions when President Lincoln called for 750,000 troops in April of 1861.

### Flipped Counties in Secession Referendum

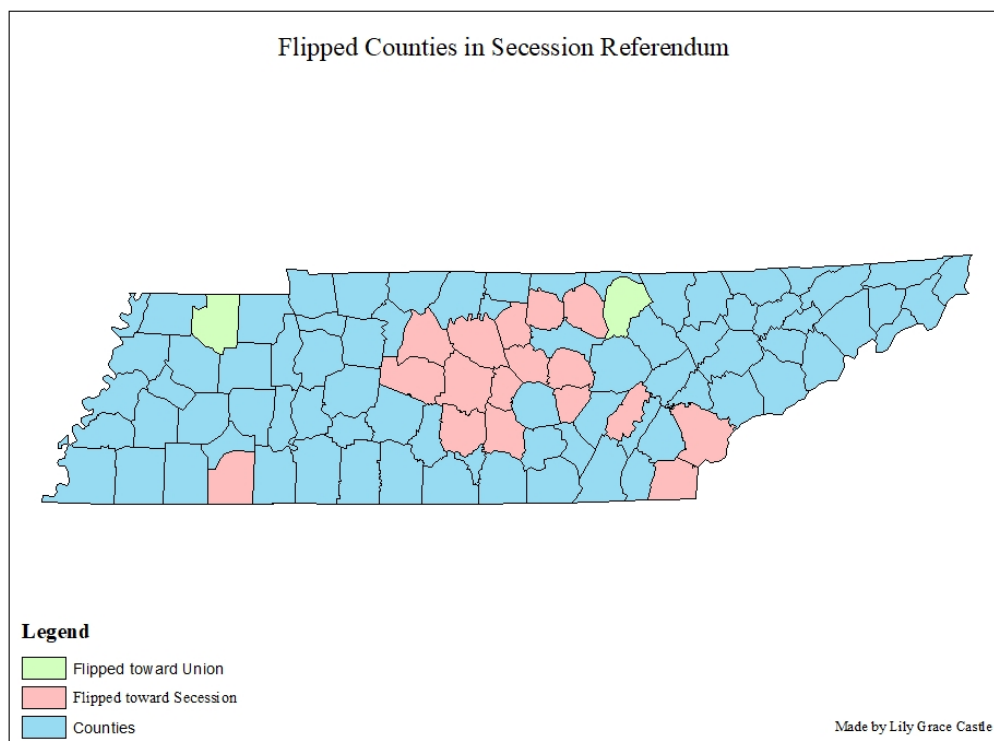


Figure 2-1

Many more historians take issue with the use of newspapers in a scholarly argument, and for valid reasons. Newspapers are written by humans with their own context and their own opinions; those humans get paid by companies, institutions, or entrepreneurs with their own context and their own opinions. Sometimes this immediate judgment of newspapers stems from the current status of newspapers and news organizations in the United States. The most popular or most prominent news organizations are incredibly polarized in 2022. Many historians, therefore, ask the question: if newspapers are so polarized and frequently untrustworthy today, why should newspapers be trusted at all? The largest difference between today's newspapers and the newspapers of the 1860s is

the level of intentionality and deliberate openness about their political views. Many newspapers called themselves the “Democrat,” “Republican,” or “Whig.” Others might not put their affiliated political party in their name, but would, at least, advertise which candidates they endorsed. While the facts remain consistent and accurate across different newspapers, only the commentary and tone changes across party lines in Middle Tennessee newspapers.

Rather than using the newspapers’ information as evidence in this study, it is just as useful—if not more so—to use the newspapers’ identity and political shifts surrounding different events. In short, it will be useful to lean into and embrace newspapers’ subjectivity rather than make an attempt to defend their fact-based journalism skills.

Unlike the majority of the Confederacy’s member states, Tennessee did not mention the institution of slavery in their argument for secession. While other Confederate states specifically made the preservation of slavery their reason for secession, enough Tennesseans identified enough with the South to join in the fight against Lincoln’s “coercion.” As early as late February 1861 (less than a month after the vote to stay in the Union), the *Daily Nashville Patriot* cited then President-elect Abraham Lincoln’s speech in Indianapolis: Lincoln spoke about the possibility of sending an army to South Carolina to take back the forts that belonged to the United States. *The Daily Nashville Patriot* commented that Lincoln’s idea would qualify as coercion. At this point, the *Patriot* claims, most Tennesseans wanted to remain in the Union to keep the peace. Once the war began in April of 1861, and Lincoln ordered federal troops to invade the Confederate States, the *Daily Nashville Patriot* changed its opinion, hoping that the Tennessee legislature would move to help “repel from Southern soil the prosecutors of this infamous

war of subjugation.” Until June of 1861, when Tennesseans cast their ballots and seceded from the Union, the *Patriot* posted every single day with more developments or opinions on why Tennessee should secede. Leading up to Abraham Lincoln’s election and the Civil War, the *Patriot* had identified itself thoroughly with the Constitutional Unionist Party, aiming to preserve both slavery and the Union. The publisher of the *Patriot*, A. S. Camp & Company, never gives an explicit reason for its immediate shift following the president’s call for troops.<sup>42</sup>

The *Nashville Daily Gazette* typically published very Whiggish or Constitutional Unionist material before and after the election of Abraham Lincoln. Its editor’s name was W. N. Bilbo. He very much identified with moderate views of the Whig Party as well as the Know-Nothing Party. In 1864, he left the newspaper and Tennessee altogether, to lobby for the Thirteenth Amendment. Nothing is known of Bilbo’s personal views during the onset of the war, but the *Gazette* itself actually followed the same trend as the *Patriot*. On February thirteenth of 1861, the *Gazette* published the same speech that president-elect Abraham Lincoln made in Indianapolis, about taking the forts in South Carolina back for the United States. At this point, similarly to the *Patriot*, the *Gazette* began to publish more Democratic—right wing, pro-secession—material. Once shots were fired on Fort Sumter in April of 1861, the *Gazette* joined the *Patriot* in switching its loyalties to that of the Confederate States.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Mr. Lincoln at Indianapolis,” *The Daily Nashville Patriot*, 13 February 1861.; “Call of the Legislature,” *The Daily Nashville Patriot*, 20 April 1861; “About Daily Nashville Patriot 1860-1862,” Library of Congress.

<sup>43</sup> “Mr. Lincoln at Indianapolis,” *Nashville Daily Gazette*, 13 February 1861; “A United People,” *Nashville Daily Gazette*, 21 April 1861; William Harris, *Lincoln’s Last Months*, (Boston: Belknap Press, 2004); “Daily Gazette,” Library of Congress.

Next, the *Republican Banner*, ancestor of the *Tennessean*, followed the Whig and Republican parties. Comparing the paper to those aforementioned, the *Banner* was likely more “center left” as we would know it in the twenty-first century rather than as liberal as the political affiliations may sound. The *Banner* did not mention president-elect Lincoln’s address in Indianapolis, as the paper spent much of its pre-war time reported on the grievances of East Tennessee. East Tennessee held three separate conventions to try to secede from Tennessee and rejoin the United States as its own state. They cited that Tennessee’s secession from the United States was against the constitution.<sup>44</sup> If *Nashville* had not been in the newspaper’s name, one would think that the paper came from Knoxville during the winter and spring of 1861. A published synopsis of the paper, however, claims that Tennesseans changed their minds “over night.” Leading up to the second vote in June of 1861, the *Banner* advertised on the front page to vote for “Southern Independence.” Three newspapers, all published and edited by different people, exhibit a swift change at the outbreak of war in April of 1861.<sup>45</sup>

It is worth mentioning that there is a relative lack of Democratic newspapers in Nashville at that time. Similar political representation will come from Williamson County. Franklin’s *Weekly Review*, had the same moderate or Whiggish sympathies as most of the newspapers in Nashville at the time. Its pre-war owner, Donald Cameron, held sectionalism in much disdain, insisting that party is more than important than

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<sup>44</sup> Eric Lacy, *Vanquished Volunteers: East Tennessee Sectionalism from Statehood to Secession*, (Johnson City: East Tennessee State University Press, 1965), 122-126.

<sup>45</sup> “Republican Banner,” Library of Congress; Ed Huddleston, *The Civil War in Middle Tennessee (In Four Parts): Originally Published by the Nashville Banner as Four Separate Supplements, Commemorating the Civil War’s Centennial Years*, (Nashville: Pantheon Press, 1965), 14.

sectionalism, and the country was more important than any political party.<sup>46</sup> It is worth mentioning that Franklin was a tiny town, making it quite easy for a newspaper to go out of business should it offend its readers. It is likely, therefore, that Williamson County newspapers would attempt to reflect rather than to change the opinion of the reader.<sup>47</sup> Williamson County had a very similar experience as that of Davidson County. The last thing that Williamson County wanted was a war. They were prospering, and did not want anything to get in the way of that. However, just as Davidson County newspapers switched in Nashville when President Lincoln called for troops, so too did Franklin's *Weekly Review*.<sup>48</sup>

Williamson County historian, Bob Holladay, argues that the onset of the war made all of Tennessee feel like it had to make a choice, abandoning any neutrality, and that Williamson County “chose slavery over the Union.” In general, that seems to be the case; however, the residents of Williamson County were more nuanced, in that, generation created a divide in politics.<sup>49</sup>

Since the end of the Civil War, residents of Williamson County have passed down the story of the Battle of Franklin, and how it affected the then small town of Franklin, Tennessee. Residents began saving the houses affected by the battle, inviting tourists to come in and learn about the battle, and conducting research on those who lived, died, fought, or were enslaved there. In 2011, two historic sites, Carnton and Carter House,

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<sup>46</sup> The *Weekly Review*, Franklin, 9 February 1860.

<sup>47</sup> Bob Holladay, “Antebellum Williamson County Newspapers and the Struggle for Local Identity,” *Williamson County Historical Society Journal* no. 42 (2011): 121.

<sup>48</sup> The *Weekly Review*, 9 February 1860.

<sup>49</sup> Holladay, “James Hogan, Jr., and the Conflicts of Antebellum Southern Identity in Williamson County,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*.

merged to form the Battle of Franklin Trust. The original owners of these homes (the McGavock family and Carter family) exhibited a drive to stay in the Union as well as a shift to the Confederate cause that echoed through Tennessee as the first shots fired over Fort Sumter in South Carolina.<sup>50</sup>

Williamson County in the 1850s and 60s differed greatly from Nashville and Davidson County at large. The county was still quite rural, yet just suburban enough to have connections to Nashville. The Williamson County elite held close ties with President Andrew Jackson before and during his time in office in the 1830s. Old Hickory left a lasting impression on many Tennesseans, especially those of Williamson County. Similarly, Reagan Republicans today, having grown up hearing heartwarming stories about how life was so grand and profitable under his administration, try to stay faithful to the Republican Party of the 1980s via a legendary view of Regan. Many of these same Reagan Republicans voted for Donald Trump in 2016 but anybody but Trump in 2020. They were loyal to the Republican Party until they realized that Trump no longer led the Republican Party that they grew up with. A similar analysis can be made for those who grew up on stories of President Andrew Jackson. During Jackson's administration, he successfully suppressed South Carolina's threats of secession during the Nullification Crisis. He "saw it as a threat to the Union," and this ideology lasted in many Williamson County until the onset of the Civil War.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Holladay, "James Hogan, Jr. "

<sup>51</sup> Marsha Mullin, "Andrew Jackson and Nullification," Andrew Jackson's Hermitage: Home of the People's President; Susan Milligan, "Trump's GOP Drives Out Reagan Republicans," *U. S. News and World Report*; Holladay, "Ideas Have Consequences: Whig Party Politics in Williamson County, Tennessee, and the Road to Disunion," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2004): 155–77.

These Jacksonian Democrats included Colonel John McGavock. He grew up in a household that Old Hickory visited frequently on business as well as leisure. His father, Randal McGavock, worked closely with Jackson during his time in politics in Nashville in the 1820s. John would have been about fifteen years old during the Nullification Crisis. By the time the Civil War broke out, John was forty-six years old, owned forty-four slaves, but was quite a moderate Democrat, hoping to preserve the Union as well as slavery. In February of 1861, he voted to remain in the Union, but there exists no record of how or if he voted in June of 1861. He did not go to war, but he sent all of his slaves south to Louisiana and Alabama in 1862 as slaves around Tennessee escaped to Union-held Nashville by the droves. In classic Jacksonian fashion, John McGavock signed an Oath of Allegiance to the United States in 1863.<sup>52</sup> John McGavock's actual views of secession are quite unclear; yet, his actions made it clear that he wished to preserve slavery—or at least retain his investment in his slaves—as well as preserve the Union.

Moreover, Fountain Branch Carter remained a Union man throughout his life. In February of 1861, Carter voted to remain in the Union. In June, Carter also did not vote. In 1864, he began to pay his slaves, and upon his death, he left land and belongings to some of his former slaves. There is not much research on any relationship Carter had with President Andrew Jackson; however, the generational divide in the Carter family comes with the onset of war. Carter's sons—Francis Watkins, Moscow, and Tod—did not want to leave the Union, but ultimately joined the Confederate Army against the will of their father. Fountain Branch voted to stay in the Union in February of 1861, yet he

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<sup>52</sup> Sources located at Carnton. Will provide.



claimed that secessionists coerced him out of voting in June of 1861, knowing that he was a Unionist. Ultimately, on November 30, 1864, Tod Carter fought in the Battle of Franklin, and sustained nine bullet wounds. He passed away in the family home two days later.<sup>53</sup>

Maury County was larger, more suburban, and more conservative than Williamson County. The main publication in Maury County leading up to the Civil War was the *Herald and Mail*. It remained fervently conservative before, during, and after the Civil War. Similar to the first seven Confederate states, it preached the right to own slaves, regardless of the legality of secession. Maury County voted in both February and June of 1861 to leave the Union. The reason the county is featured in this work is because of a resident of Maury County, named Nathaniel Francis Cheairs. Cheairs made good friends with Constitutional Unionist candidate and Whig, John Bell. They were such good friends that Cheairs opened his house to Bell for a rally leading up to the presidential election of November of 1860. In February of 1861, Cheairs voted to remain in the Union. He did not vote in the June election, however, because he was already a Captain in the Confederate Army. He wrote in his memoir that he “could not would not fight against my own people,” insinuating that he joined the war in an effort to defend the South as a whole. Williamson and Davidson counties seceded eventually for the same reason as Nat Cheairs went off to war after opposing secession yet defending slavery.<sup>54</sup>

While most of Tennessee changed its view on the fundamental status of secession, East Tennessee doubled down on their beliefs that it was pure treason. East Tennessee

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Harbin, “Journey to Freedom: Jack and Calfurnia Carter,” the Battle of Franklin Trust; Other sources located at Carnton. Will provide.

<sup>54</sup> *The Herald and Mail*, 30 March 1861; Cheairs.

held a convention on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1861, and discussed secession from the state of Tennessee. The member counties were Bledsoe, Blount, Bradley, Campbell, Carter, Cocke, Claiborne, Cumberland, Fentress, Grainger, Greene, Hawkins, Hancock, Hamilton, Johnson, Jefferson, Knox, Morgan, Monroe, Marion, McMinn, Meigs, Polk, Rhea, Roane, Scott, Sevier, Sullivan, Union, and Washington.<sup>55</sup> *Brownlow's Whig* published the East Tennessee Convention's Declaration of Grievances on June 29<sup>th</sup>. They made claims that Middle and West Tennessee committed election fraud and censored the pro-Union press in any way that they could. The declaration mentions the use of double voting, while poll workers policed known Union men, making sure that they voted with unfolded ballots. At the end of the Declaration, the East Tennessee Convention makes their case that,

“We prefer to remain attached to the Government of our fathers. The Constitution of the United States has done us no wrong. The Congress of the United States has passed no law to oppress us. The President of the United States has made no threat against the law-abiding people of Tennessee. Under the Government of the United States, we have enjoyed as a nation more of civil and religious freedom than any other people under the whole heaven. We believe there is no cause for rebellion or secession on the part of the people of Tennessee.”<sup>56</sup>

During this same issue of *Brownlow's Whig*, Brownlow reported that somebody had sent a package to the newspaper itself. Upon opening it, Brownlow said it contained a piece of cloth or a blanket that had the appearance of a smallpox blanket. He makes the

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<sup>55</sup> William Gannaway Brownlow, “Proceedings of the East Tennessee Convention,” *Brownlow's Whig*, 20 June 1861.

<sup>56</sup> William Gannaway Brownlow, “Declaration of Grievances,” *Brownlow's Whig*, 29 June 1861.

point that a deed like this highlights the “Spirit of Secession.”<sup>57</sup> This Spirit that Brownlow named, is domestic terrorism. This smallpox blanket that he received was an act of violence towards a civilian, with political goals. This story, while believable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, must be taken with an air of caution, as there is no other source to corroborate the claims of the newspaper.

In August of 1863, Brownlow made a speech in Franklin, the county seat of Williamson County, Tennessee. He explained why he had held his moderate opinions on secession. In typical Brownlow fashion, he essentially told the people of Franklin, “I told you so.” After all of the death and destruction brought by the Civil War thus far, after all of the lives lost on Tennessee soil, Brownlow told the audience, “You got your separation.... We are to-day in the midst of a fearful, cruel, bloody revolution, without the semblance or shadow of justification for our wicked conduct.... And now I think some of you are beginning to see your stupendous folly.” A year later, the town saw the last gasp of the Army of Tennessee at the Battle of Franklin on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1864. Within five hours, the battle took the lives of 2,500 men. The next morning, surviving soldiers said that they could walk from one side of the battlefield to the other, never touching the ground, as they searched for, identified, and buried their fallen friends, family members, and fellow soldier

The Confederacy’s final push in Franklin brought Brownlow’s words to fruition. Even though Williamson County was home to so many Whigs and moderates, Tennessee’s secession put all of its citizens in danger of warfare.

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<sup>57</sup> William Gannaway Brownlow, “Spirit of Secession,” *Brownlow’s Whig*, 29 June 1861.

Tod Carter, youngest son of Fountain Branch Carter, found himself captured in 1863. He managed to escape, traveling the country, until he linked up with his unit in Dalton, Georgia in the fall of 1864. At that time, both the United States and the Confederate armies were racing each other towards Nashville after the fall of Atlanta. During the Nashville campaign, the Confederate Army gave Tod a pass to take some time to go home to Franklin, which was en route to Nashville. On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1864, the United States Army was making great progress when the bridge across the Harpeth River in Franklin flooded. To prepare for a possible attack from the Confederates, General Jacob Cox invaded Fountain Branch Carter's home to use as a Federal headquarters, prompting Carter and his family to flee to their basement. As these events unfolded and Tod stepped foot onto his father's property for the first time in three years, his family told him to go back to his unit, as the United States army had taken their house. Neither for cause nor country, Tod turned back to his men to fight for his family and his home. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the Confederate Army made a full-frontal assault towards Carter's home. From 4:45 to 5:15, the two armies engaged in vicious hand-to-hand combat in the Carter family's front yard. The battle raged on until 9 o'clock when the U.S. army crossed their new bridge over the Harpeth River. When the family came out of their basement, the house and outbuildings were riddled with bullet holes. Out of the 40,000 men engaged in this battle, 25% died, were wounded, or went missing. One of those casualties was Tod Carter. His father and three of his sisters brought him into his bedroom, where they discovered nine gunshot wounds. He passed away two days later,

mumbling to himself, “Home. Home. Home.” He was the only soldier in the Civil War to die at his own home, with his family by his side.<sup>58</sup>

War did not discriminate on November 30, as the McGavock family got a knock at their front door as well. The visitor was chaplain Thomas Markham of William Loring’s Confederate division, notifying the family that the Confederate Army needed their home for a field hospital. Within minutes, the home was converted into a hospital, and 670 wounded and dying soldiers lay inside and outside the home. For the next seven months, the family dealt with the wounded soldiers in their home while Fountain Branch Carter spent the rest of his life trying to receive payment for the damage incurred to his home and property.<sup>59</sup>

All three families tasted war in one way or another, but two of the three never asked to be part of it. All three heads of these families paint a picture of Middle Tennessee’s experience during the Civil War.

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<sup>58</sup> “Union and Restoration in Tennessee,” *Chicago Tribune*, 29 August 1863; Eric A. Jacobson, *For Cause and for Country: A Study of the Affair at Spring Hill and the Battle of Franklin*, (Franklin: O’More Publishing, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

As tensions rose across the country in 1860 and 1861, and as state after state seceded from the Union, Middle Tennessee wanted desperately to remain in the Union. They believed it was their duty as Americans to keep the country together. They also believed that keeping the nation together would be the only way to resolve the growing tensions surrounding the expansion of slavery. From November of 1860 to February of 1861, West Tennessee became more secessionist while the rest of Tennessee remained unionist with a “wait-and-see” approach to the new administration. From February of 1861 to June of 1861—According to newspapers mentioned throughout the second chapter—it became clear to Tennesseans that, even if President Lincoln did not mean to abolish slavery initially, they became more fearful that the President may still overstep his boundaries as the Executive branch of the government. The initial issue for Tennessee’s secession was not slavery like in South Carolina or Mississippi, but the issue was the protection of the South, the protection of the homeland.

People such as Nat Cheairs and Tod Carter began to take up arms against the Federal Government in an effort to protect their homes and their families, not specifically their way of life. While many defenders of the Lost Cause may call the Civil War the “War of Northern Aggression,” many in Tennessee saw the war as more of a “War of Federal Aggression.”

In June of 1861, a combination of local politics and national politics decided the fate of an entire state. Only by looking at maps as well as local media and personal

accounts, can we understand the people of Middle Tennessee and their decisions that made Tennessee the eleventh Confederate State.

Studies such as this one—comparing large-scale politics against local politics and media representation—could benefit other Confederate states with Unionist regions.

Alternatively, a study such as this one could benefit Unionist states with Secessionist regions. As historiography seeks more nuance, historians gain more understanding of the individuals who lived during the Civil War—their lives, opinions, and how their actions affected those locally and nationally.

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