



Secession in North Carolina—A Lesson Plan

General Overview

Following the election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860, the states of the lower South seceded from the Union. In North Carolina the citizens were not of one mind on the issue. Prior to April 1861 the majority of North Carolinians were opposed to secession, but there was a very vocal minority in favor of joining the Confederacy. The secessionist movement included the governor of the state, John W. Ellis. Unionists counted among their numbers prominent figures such as Congressman Zebulon Vance. In February 1861 the state's citizens voted on whether to call a convention to discuss the issue. The referendum failed, indicating that even at that late date most Tar Heels were not willing to consider the possibility. Yet it was a divisive topic, and some families were divided on the issue. Views of many North Carolinians about secession changed in April 1861. As the tide of public opinion turned, the course of the state's history was forever altered as well.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Use interpretation of documentary sources to analyze the contemporary attitudes of North Carolinians regarding the secession issue
2. Examine how the issue affected both personal and political lives
3. Trace the evolution of thought on the issue of secession in North Carolina
4. Appreciate the value of documentary volumes in researching history

Preparation

Have students read sections from their textbook on the election of 1860 and the South's reaction to it. Further reading should include information about the war and its effects on North Carolina.

Activities

Have students read excerpts from documentary sources. You may use the questions following each section to provoke discussion and develop historical analytic thinking.

Enrichment and Extension

1. Have students expand their research and develop a dramatic presentation based on individual views of secession.
2. Additional research projects can focus on answers to these questions: What were some long-term results of North Carolina's joining the Confederacy? How important was the slavery issue in the secession movement? What role did former Unionists have in the new government?
3. Assign students to read about secession in leading North Carolina newspapers of the era to determine what editorial position papers took regarding the issue.

The Secession Movement in North Carolina

The final rift between North and South was years in the making. Historically, while the two sections sometimes differed on other issues, such as tariffs, the predominant dividing point was the subject of slavery—the South’s “peculiar institution.” In the decades prior to the 1860s, Congress was forced to construct numerous compromises to diffuse the conflict. The divisiveness came to a head in November 1860. In that month four candidates ran for the office of president. Abraham Lincoln campaigned on the Republican ticket. Many southerners viewed Lincoln as antislavery and felt that he would act to abolish slavery throughout the United States. The Democrats offered two candidates. Stephen A. Douglas supported a platform that endorsed popular sovereignty for states—the right of each state to choose whether to be slave or free—and proposed that questions about slavery in the territories be decided by the Supreme Court. John Breckenridge represented the view of many southern Democrats that popular sovereignty should be the policy in both states and territories. A third party, the Constitutional Union Party, ran John Bell on a platform that simply endorsed the Constitution, the Union, and the laws of the land. When the votes were in, Lincoln had fallen far short of winning the popular vote, having won about one vote in forty; however, he won the electoral votes in every free state except New Jersey, making him the winner. In North Carolina, Breckenridge, the southern candidate, won the state’s electoral votes but had only a slim popular majority over Bell, the Constitutional Union candidate.

There was an immediate reaction to the election from the Deep South. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the United States. On the national level, efforts were made to find a compromise that would keep the other southern states in the Union. John J. Crittenden of Kentucky introduced a compromise plan that would permanently protect slavery in the states in which it already existed and permit slavery in the territories south of the 36° 30’ line established by the Missouri Compromise. Republican leaders agreed with the first part of the proposal, and Congress adopted it. Had the proposal gone to the states for ratification, there is a great likelihood that the Thirteenth Amendment would have guaranteed slavery rather than abolish it. But Lincoln opposed the extension of slavery into the territories. That part of the plan was defeated, resulting in the secession of six other southern states.

In North Carolina two factions arose: unionists (those who favored staying in the Union) and secessionists (those who wanted to break away and form a new nation). Unionist sentiment was very strong, as the support for John Bell indicated. Even many slave owners felt that Lincoln’s election alone was not sufficient cause for secession. The debate continued until April 15, 1861. On that date, following the April 12 firing on Fort Sumter, Gov. John W. Ellis received a telegram from Simon Cameron, Lincoln’s secretary of war. The telegram, which was sent to all states still in the Union, asked for two regiments of troops for immediate military service. The south viewed this as an act of war, and most southerners, even those who opposed secession, felt they were now forced to choose sides. Following are excerpts of writings presenting views on secession prior to May 20, 1861, when North Carolina left the Union. Information about the writers can be found in the annotated bibliography.

Catherine Edmondston

November 25, 1860

“Mr. Miller [Mrs. Edmondston’s brother-in-law] seems to have an especial spite against Slave holders; asks in a tone of acrimony and bitterness if ‘we expect the West and the white population who have none, to fight for our negroes?’ ‘Certainly I do.’ ”

February 10, 1861

“Sister Frances is a terrible Unionist! Right or wrong, this ‘Glorious Union’ is every thing. Now it is no longer glorious—when it ceases to be voluntary, it degenerates into a hideous oppression. Regret it heartily, mourn over it as for a lost friend, but do not seek to enforce it; it is like galvanizing a dead body.”

February 18, 1861

“It gets almost painful to go to Father’s we differ so widely. He it is true says nothing personal or unhand-some, but he censures so sweepingly every thing that SC does. Mama & Susan do go on so about the ‘Flag.’ Who cares for the old striped rag now that the principle it represented is gone? It is but an emblem of a past glory. How can it be upheld when the spirit—nay even the body—that gave it value is lost?”

February 18, 1861

“Today was inaugurated at Montgomery Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, consisting of the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana & Texas. O that North Carolina would join with her Southern sisters—sisters in blood, in soil, in climate & in institution.”



- What is the situation regarding views on secession within Mrs. Edmondston’s family?
- What is Mrs. Edmondston’s personal view of secession?
- What reasons does she give for her opinion on the issue of secession?
- To what is she referring when she says that North Carolina and other southern states are sisters in institution?

William A. Graham

To Alfred M. Waddell, February 5, 1861

“ . . . it is well known that I am far from believing his election merely is a cause for abandonment of the Government of our Fathers, and especially for its overthrow by unlawful violence. . . . All such proceedings are based on the mistaken supposition, that the Government is a monarchy, and the President a sovereign to whom we owe allegiance, and who may regulate and influence our destinies at his pleasure, whereas he is but the chief servant among those of the national household. . . .”



- Does William A. Graham’s view differ from Mrs. Edmondston’s? If so, how?
- Were they of the same social class?
- What is a monarchy?
- To what does former Gov. Graham compare the office of the president?

John W. Ellis

*To Robert Gourdin of South Carolina,
December 25, 1860*

“There is a fierce opposition here to Southern rights, growing mainly out of old party divisions, but we will overcome it. The people are fully alive to their interests.”

To Isham W. Garrott of Alabama, January 30, 1861

“The abolitionists will continue to amuse us with hopes of compromise without any real purpose to make a Substantial Settlement. They are Seeking time, within which to get control of the army and navy and the powers of the government. They will make a strenuous effort to detach the Southern States from you, but rely upon it the Southern rights men in North Carolina will never desert you. We have Submissionists here but the great heart of the people is right. You may count us in for we are determined to be with you Soon.”



- What is Gov. Ellis’s view of secession?
- What was the situation in South Carolina at the time the December letter was written?
- Would the recipient of the letter most likely favor or oppose secession? Why?
- To whom is Ellis referring when he writes of “submissionists”?
- What does he say the abolitionists are seeking and for what purpose?

Zebulon B. Vance

To William Dickson, December 11, 1860

“The Whole Southern mind is inflamed to the highest pitch and the leaders in the disunion move are scorning every suggestion of compromise and rushing everything with ruinous and indecent haste that would seem to imply that they were absolute fools—Yet they are acting wisely for their ends—they are “precipitating” the people into a revolution without giving them time to think – They fear lest the people shall think;. . .But the people must think, and when they do begin to think and hear the matter properly discussed they will consider long and soberly before they tear down this noble fabric and invite anarchy and confusion, carnage, civil war, and financial ruin with the breathless hurry of

men flying from pestilence. . . .If we go out now we cant take the army and the navy with us, and Lincoln could as easily employ them to force us back as he could to prevent our going out. . . .We have everything to gain and nothing on earth to lose by delay, but by too hasty action we may take a fatal step that we never can retrace—may lose a heritage that we can never recover ‘though we seek it earnestly and with tears.’”



- How does Congressman Vance’s view differ from Governor Ellis’s in regard to time?
- Both men refer to what organizations that are of interest to North and South?
- Of the previous passages, with whom would Vance most likely agree?

Jonathan Worth

To Springs, Oak & Co., May 13, 1861

“I have been the most persevering and determined public man in my State to preserve the Union—the last to abandon the hope, that the good sense of the Nation would prevent a collision between the extremes, each of which I viewed with equal abhorrence. I am left no other alternative but to fight for or against my section. I can not hesitate. Lincoln has made us a unit to resist until we repel our invaders or die.”

To D. G. Worth, May 15, 1861

“I think the South is committing suicide, but my lot is cast with the South and being unable to manage the ship, I intend to face the breakers manfully and go down with my companions.”



- What significant events happened in April prior to these letters being written?
- What was Senator Worth’s stance on secession previously?
- What new position does he support in the letters?
- According to the letter to his brother, what are his private thoughts on the matter?

Bibliography

Crabtree, Beth G., and James W. Patton, eds. *Journal of a Secesh Lady: The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston*. Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, 1979.

Catherine Anne Devereux Edmondston was the daughter of a wealthy eastern North Carolina planter. In 1846 she married Patrick Muir Edmondston, a South Carolinian, and they eventually settled on a plantation in Halifax County, North Carolina, where they were living in 1860. In June of that year Mrs. Edmondston began a journal in which she recorded her thoughts and observations of current events.

de Roulhac Hamilton, J. G., ed. *The Correspondence of Jonathan Worth*. Vol. 1. Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Co., 1909.

Jonathan Worth was serving as a state senator in 1861.

Johnston, Frontis W. *The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance*. Raleigh: Department of Archives and History, 1963.

Zebulon Vance was serving in the United States Congress in 1860.

Tolbert, Noble J. *The Papers of John Willis Ellis*. Vol. 2. Raleigh: Department of Archives and History, 1964.

John Willis Ellis was governor of the state from 1858 until June 1861.

Williams, Max and J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, eds. *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*. Vol. 5. Raleigh: The North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1973.

William A. Graham held a number of prominent positions prior to 1860, including governor of North Carolina, United States senator, and secretary of the navy. He owned several plantations worked by slave labor.

