

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 16, 2012

History of West Virginia: This is a strange subject to be explored in our *Weekly News*, but there is little written about the West Virginia's separation from Virginia during the Civil War. I have pieced together what I think happened.

The vast areas "west of the mountains" in George Washington's Virginia had poorly defined borders. Before 1760, when the British were fighting the French for control of the vast lands west of the Alleghenies, Virginia claimed what is now Pittsburgh and the area north almost to Lake Erie. However, the several Lord Baltimores claimed land north of the Potomac River, and Mason and Dixon's survey made soon after the French were out of the picture determined the border between Maryland and Pennsylvania. Virginia, however, still had a lot of territory west to the Ohio River and south to the border with North Carolina and Tennessee. I met a man in the service during World War II who lived in the extreme southwest corner of Virginia near Cumberland Gap. He told me he lived closer to eight other state capitals than he did to Richmond, the capital of his state. Checking on a map of the eastern United States, I verified that he was correct.

When John Brown raided the Federal armory at Harper's Ferry in 1859, it was in Virginia, as it was in 1861 when "Stonewall" Jackson stole more than 100 steam locomotives from the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and moved them by mule teams to Strasburg, Virginia, a Confederate railhead. However, the western counties of Virginia were inhabited by hardworking white families who could not afford slaves, and they did not like slavery. They were not in favor of their state seceding from the Union to join the Confederacy. All this happened in 1861, however, but West Virginia did not become a state until 1863. What transpired in the meantime? Very little is written on the subject.

One historical source says West Virginia seceded from Virginia because it didn't want to secede from the United States. Whether it wanted to or not, it did secede from the U.S. in 1861, as it was part of Virginia. Why and how did Virginia let it go between 1861 and 1863? I assume the state had no success in enlisting men from these western areas to fight for the Confederacy, and since Virginia was busy defending itself (and the South) from Union forces during this period, it could not divert a major effort toward holding these unhappy western counties. It is also possible that prospective leaders in these counties thought the war would soon be over and that when peace was declared, they could still be happy as Virginians.

After the Battle of Antietam in October 1862, President Lincoln announced his intention to sign an Emancipation Proclamation, which he did on New Year's Day, 1863. Soon after, these unhappy western counties were admitted to the Federal Union as the State of West Virginia. Was there a direct connection here? I asked Kathryn May, a native West Virginian, about these details, and she said she would research an answer. I assume that the new state elected a governor and sent a delegation to the U.S. Congress almost immediately.