

# Huntsville Historical Review

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Volume 37  
Number 1 *Urban Renewal*

Article 5

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10-1-2013

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### Recommended Citation

Coe, Jennifer G. (2013) "Unionism in Huntsville and Knoxville: A Comparative Study of Tennessee River Valley Towns, 1860-1865," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 37: No. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol37/iss1/5>

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## **Unionism in Huntsville and Knoxville: A Comparative Study of Tennessee River Valley Towns, 1860-1865**

**By Jennifer G. Coe**

A comparison of the two cities in the Tennessee Valley, Huntsville, Alabama, and Knoxville, Tennessee, during the American Civil War reveals that both cities held political, economic, and strategic assets that made them important military objectives to the Union army. Many Unionists in both Huntsville and Knoxville never wanted to secede from the United States and continued to remain loyal to the old government throughout the war. In order to study Unionism in a broader context and better understand why some Southerners rebelled against the Rebels, this method will contrast the occupation of Knoxville by the Confederacy with the Union occupation of Huntsville. The goal of the comparative is to trace the behavior of Unionists while living in the occupied cities of the South, in an effort to better understand what loyalty to the Union meant to them; whether it was founded mainly on an attachment to the nation as a whole or informed more by local ties to their communities.

Due to the initial Union occupation and control of North Alabama railroads and commercial traffic, as well as the early establishment of a garrison at Huntsville, most Unionists in the area chose to remain at home in order to defend their families and property. Most Knoxville Unionists under the Confederate military government also preferred to remain quietly at home, however this was no longer a possibility after a series of uprisings and Confederate conscription laws first announced in April of 1862. The Confederate hard policy provoked most Unionists there to embark upon the treacherous journey through the rebel infested Cumberland pass to Kentucky to muster into Federal forces.

Under Federal protection in Huntsville, Unionists took advantage of the urban character of the town and its surrounding county. The diversification of commercial development combined with a broad set of economic and social connections

extended the physical, social, and demographic scope of the Unionist neighborhoods. Their communities formed coextensive with a large proportion of slaves and a slave-owning population of loyalists, which allowed them to stay at home and contribute to the Union cause through networks of cotton planters, non-slaveholding yeoman, white and black artisans, and town-dwellers.<sup>1</sup> This community of disparate individuals, who otherwise held nothing in common, often cooperated as spies. Huntsville's Unionists also acted as home guards, and held administrative positions appointed by the post commander.<sup>2</sup>

By tracing these overlapping ties to each other and their secessionist neighbors it is evident that many of the reasons that Unionists in both cities chose to remain loyal to the old government and constitution remained essentially the same. However, differences in the upper valley region in Knoxville combined with the circumstances of the occupation highlights the different ways Unionists acted to support the Federal Government. The evidence reveals that more loyalists from Knoxville supported the Union by volunteering to serve in the Union army, while most loyalists in Huntsville and Madison County remained at home to protect their families and property.

In the decade that preceded the war Unionists in both cities supported the right to own slaves and the expansion of slavery into the territories. Nevertheless, a minority of unconditional Unionists' chose not to support a radical solution that involved nation building or that risked losing their old government and constitution, in order to guarantee the right to own slaves.

Even though the city of Knoxville portrayed a "house divided" on the subject of secession, two referendums in Tennessee revealed that Knox County residents as well as most of East Tennessee roundly defeated disunion by a margin of two

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss: Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, (2004), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Storey, 88.

to one; most likely on the basis that, as a Knoxville Unionist Oliver Temple declared during a public rally on secession, Unionists believed that "the only safety for Slavery is in the Union under the Constitution."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Huntsville remained loath to give up slavery but reluctant to secede over it. It contained a burgeoning industrial and professional class who easily adapted the institution to their small manufacturing and farming concerns. Huntsville, Alabama, situated between the Tennessee River and the Tennessee state line, lay at the fringes of cotton country within the Tennessee Valley. Its fertile land accommodated many moderate to large cotton plantations (although they were by no means as large as those of the black-belt region). Initially settled in 1805, and established in 1811, Huntsville attracted a diverse mixture of small freeholders, well-to-do planters, and sons of the educated professional class, such as the future territorial governor and U.S. Senator, Clement Comer Clay, who incidentally migrated to Madison County from East Tennessee near Knoxville. As the territorial seat of government and temporary capital where the first state constitution was drafted, Huntsville enjoyed immense political influence within the state until 1819, at about the same time the Planters' and Merchants' Bank (known as the Huntsville Bank) failed. After Alabama was admitted to the Union, the capital relocated several times before its permanent establishment at Montgomery in 1846, denoting a southward shift in political power in the state, the location of Alabama's large and prosperous Black-Belt region. However, many socially and politically prominent individuals still resided in Huntsville, so that by 1860 it often led the way in economic and community progress. The town still exuded an air of prosperity with spacious public buildings constructed primarily of brick, a handsome courthouse, and four churches, (two Methodist, one Baptist, and one Presbyterian). The city boasted

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<sup>3</sup> Temple quoted in Robert Tracy McKenzie, *Lincolmites and Rebels: A Town Divided in the American Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55.

three well-established institutions of learning, the Huntsville Female Seminary, the Huntsville Female College, Greene Academy, and one yet complete \$35,000 preparatory school called North Alabama College that would prepare students for their higher education at prestigious northern schools such as Yale and Princeton, only to return and serve as doctors and lawyers in the community.<sup>4</sup>

Other examples of Huntsville's increasing economic and urban sophistication, the development of the first public water system west of the Alleghenies, gas lights and Macadamized roads. These roadways and turnpikes linked stagecoach routes to Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga, and from Chattanooga links went as far as Boston, New York, and Charleston. Businessmen and cotton-factors also made connections by water, mostly to New Orleans and Mobile. However. However by 1850 North Alabamians secured enough local government funding, supplemented with private investment and state loans, to begin construction on the Memphis and Charleston Railroad.<sup>5</sup> Coextensive with the development of the railroad, North Alabamians also experienced the return of high cotton prices, and cotton profits fueled investment and the diversification of Huntsville's commercial development. This important northeast to southwest rail artery linked Huntsville to a regional trade hub that included North Alabama, East Tennessee, and North Georgia. By 1860, a newly completed depot housed the division headquarters for the Memphis & Charleston Railroad that included machine shops, turntables, and engine-houses as well as a main office for the North Alabama Telegraph Company operated by J.H. Larcombe. The telegraph and railroad linked Huntsville with the rest of the country faster than steamboats and

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Jane Chadick, *Incidents of the Civil War: The Civil War Journal of Mary Jane Chadick*, edited by Nancy M. Rohr (Huntsville: Silver Threads Publishing, 2005), 4-6.; 1859-1860 Huntsville, Alabama City Directory (Originally Published in 1859 by Coltart & Son), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Harncourt, *The Planter's Railway: Excitement and Civil War Years*, (Arab: Heritage Publishing Company, 1995), 75-80.

stagecoaches. So, although geography seemed to separate the sub-regions of the Tennessee Valley from the Hill Country just south of it and from the rest of the state, Huntsville, and Madison County had long built economic and political ties to its northern neighbor Tennessee and beyond. The development of modern transport and communications contributed to the city's place as a center of commerce and industry in North Alabama. Consequent to the decade of economic diversification and technological development before the war the population of Huntsville inflated to 3,600 people whereas the surrounding county experienced a decrease in whites and an increase in slaves.<sup>6</sup>

Knoxville, Tennessee, founded in 1791, like Huntsville, was the state's first capital and up until the War of 1812 at least, had been an important seat of government. After its temporary heyday the state legislature voted to move the capital from Knoxville to the boomtown of Nashville, owing mainly to the economic opportunity to be had in the fertile valley in Middle Tennessee. Situated in a valley surrounded by the Smokey Mountains to the southeast, and on the northwest by the Cumberland Plateau, Knoxville remained isolated by high mountains not conducive to overland trade. Moreover, shallow rivers, only navigable for half of the year, frustrated efforts to increase trade further south into North Alabama. As a consequence East Tennessee lost population and political influence to the more productive farming region to the west, precipitating its decline into a provincial backwater. Although its valley lands were quite fertile and well situated to produce corn, wheat, hay, cattle, and hogs, the region was not suitable for the type of large remunerative plantation economies like those of Middle Tennessee and the lower South. Until the rail road came to Knoxville, prohibitive transportation costs discouraged shipping or a large scale trade in agricultural commodities, and as a consequence no development of a large plantation economy,

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<sup>6</sup> Chadick, 5-6; Anthony Lyndon Helton, 1991 "Economics and Politics in Antebellum Madison County, Alabama: 1850-1860", Masters Diss., University of Alabama, Huntsville.

which obviated the establishment of a large population of slaves: however it did sustain an abundance of independent, self reliant, white yeoman farmers.<sup>7</sup>

Economic growth stagnated while farmers depended upon hauling goods by wagon or on foot. The Tennessee River offered the area's best opportunity for a north-south avenue for commerce but thanks to a series of treacherous shoals in northern Alabama the river system primarily facilitated trade within Tennessee. Yet at least since the 1830s regular steamboat traffic operated between Knoxville and northern Alabama carrying a small but significant trade in foodstuffs between the small yeoman farmers in East Tennessee and the large plantations on the fringes of cotton country in North Alabama.<sup>8</sup>

Much like Huntsville, a bustle of commercial activity took place in the 1850s with the development of the railroad to Knoxville. After decades of political wrangling related to Knoxville's political impotence, and the repeal of the State Internal Improvements act in 1838 which generated enormous resentment in much of East Tennessee, finally the state, along with the private investment of Knoxville's leading citizens, subsidized construction of the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad. The advent of this transportation revolution served to integrate East Tennessee into the broader regional and national markets. East Tennessee farmers shifted more heavily into wheat production to take advantage of new markets causing an agricultural boom in the countryside. New agricultural markets led to an expansion of the wholesale trade in Knoxville, causing the town to increase its role as a commercial center of the region. In 1850 Knoxville listed only four wholesale firms, but by 1860 there were fourteen. During the decade nascent small-scale industry increased, including carriage and furniture makers, flour and grist mills, an iron foundry, stove makers and machine shops. Along with more industry and trade the population of Knoxville doubled between 1850 and 1860. In 1860 Knoxville's

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<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, 14-16.

<sup>8</sup> McKenzie, 16.

free population grew in size reaching approximately 4,000 while the size of its slave population decreased from the previous decade. In comparison Huntsville gained 540 free people and showed a slight increase in slaves who were often owned by the factories and industrial concerns where they worked side by side with whites that migrated into town from the county.<sup>9</sup>

Approximately one in ten households in East Tennessee owned slaves whereas one-third of southern households overall owned slaves with an even higher number of slave-owners per capita in most of the lower South. As a result, elite secessionists concentrated within urban Knoxville failed to persuade planters and small farmers in the countryside that separation from the Union would not separate them from their property.<sup>10</sup>

By 1860 Knoxville affected an air of intellectual refinement reflected by an obvious interest in learning and higher education. There was certainly evidence of widespread literacy considering it boasted four newspapers: a Democratic newsweekly, two Whig papers and a religious publication. The most conspicuous evidence of a learned and cultured populace, were Hampden-Sydney Academy, a preparatory school, and East Tennessee College, which would become the future University of Tennessee.<sup>11</sup>

With some exceptions the two cities were in parallel as examples of nascent commercial and railroad development that swept through the south and states west of the Mississippi River in the 1850s. What stood out was their location along the Confederate strategic line of defense, more specifically a railroad artery or so-called trunk -line. Originally conceived of to link the South economically, the rail system that linked Huntsville with Knoxville formed the sternum of the Confederacy. This trunk line ran southwest from Richmond, Virginia through the Cumberland Gap, down through Knoxville, Tennessee, to Chattanooga where junctions connected with Alabama's

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<sup>9</sup> Helton, 45.

<sup>10</sup> McKenzie, 22-25.

<sup>11</sup> McKenzie, 20.



Memphis and Charleston line that ran east to west to the Mississippi River, and Georgia's Western & Atlantic (W&A). The W&A supplied Lee's army from the arsenal in Atlanta. In fact, the junction at Chattanooga, center-square between Huntsville and Knoxville, was key to sever the Confederate forces in the east from those in the west as well as stop supplies and troops from Georgia and Alabama from reaching Lee's army in Virginia. Under the circumstances, the exigencies of war necessitated military occupations at Huntsville and Knoxville, whose cities had the unfortunate occasion to be located between Confederate and Union armies and Chattanooga.<sup>12</sup>

Politically East Tennessee was a strategic asset to the Union. Knoxville, at the center of a region legendary for the pro-Union sentiments of its East Tennessee farmers figured prominently in President Lincoln's war strategy. The prospect of an immediate occupation of this vast and friendly territory, populated by an estimated 40,000 potential Union Army recruits was so vital to the president's war objectives that it reportedly kept him awake at night.<sup>13</sup> Lincoln understood that since most small freeholders of the hilly countryside still remained isolated from the larger market economy, owned few if any slaves, they held no stake in a risky venture like secession. To exploit this opportunity, by June 1861 the war department proceeded with orders to send Federal officers to the Cumberland Gap in southeastern Kentucky in order to form regiments and muster in recruits from East Tennessee. The local Confederates also recognized the strategic value of Knoxville as a leading food-producing region, and located along the East Tennessee railroad line that linked them from Virginia to the arsenal in Atlanta, it made them an obvious target for federal occupation, notwithstanding the fact they perceived themselves as

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<sup>12</sup> Russell S. Bonds, *Stealing the General: The Great Locomotive Chase and the First Medal of Honor*, (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, LLC, 2008), 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Nelson Current *Lincoln's Loyalists: Union Soldiers From the Confederacy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 29.; Bonds, 7.

Coe: Unionism in Huntsville and Knoxville: A Comparative Study of Tenn surrounded by a hostile "fifth column" of "Lincolnite" traitors who would help the Union invade Tennessee.<sup>14</sup> With that in mind, the Confederate forces established their command of the District of East Tennessee at Knoxville.

Confederate military mobilization for the region centered in Knoxville, and facilitated troop movements for armies deployed throughout the western and eastern theaters of war. Confederate Commander of the District of East Tennessee, Felix Zollicoffer approached the twin challenges of suppressing subversion from within and preventing invasion from without by adopting a conciliatory policy toward Unionists in the town that promised to leave them and their property unmolested if they submitted to Confederate authority. Although most local belligerents probably held a sincere desire to avoid conflict, circumstances eventually conspired to undermine their peaceful coexistence in the garrison. As thousands of rowdy rebel soldiers passed through Knoxville in the summer of 1861, and the government in Richmond passed a new Alien Enemies Act, conflict over old partisan grudges culminated in the arrests of over one hundred Unionists. Civil authorities sympathetic to the Rebel government exercised broad interpretations of the act in order to charge Unionists with a wide variety of crimes of disloyalty. On the other hand, Unionist sheet, the *Knoxville Whig* contributed several withering editorials that scolded the town's most ultra Confederate elite for not volunteering for military service, criticizing those who "made big speeches in favor of the war" of staying behind and collecting large profits by selling supplies to the army.<sup>15</sup> No doubt the editor's right to free speech came into conflict with the Alien Enemies Act.

Throughout the early part of the Confederate Occupation of East Tennessee only a few Unionists, approximately 1,500 men crossed over enemy territory to volunteer for Federal military service; that is until 8 November when an insurrection in the countryside occurred. Small cells of Unionists attacked and

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<sup>14</sup> From the *Knoxville Register* quoted in McKenzie, 87-88.

<sup>15</sup> *Whig* editorial quoted in McKenzie, 99.

seriously damaged five out of the nine attempts on bridges that were burned along the main trunk line from Bristol, Tennessee and down as far south as Bridgeport, Alabama. Post Commander Kirby Smith issued draconian reprisals and declared martial law in Knox, County, where military trials took place for many of the estimated 1,000 prisoners implicated in the rebellion. Two of the five found guilty of the burnings were hanged on a gallows that the military erected in the middle of town. Dozens of Knoxville's influential Unionists including a judge and several state legislators were ordered to be imprisoned without trial until the end of the war.<sup>16</sup> And incidentally, one of those prisoners happened to be the editor of the *Whig*.<sup>17</sup>

Initially, under the watchful eye of the Confederate military authorities Unionists concluded overt resistance was foolhardy. Aside from that, before the bridge burnings the hitherto tolerant Rebels coexisted side by side with Unionists in relative peace. However, the uprisings outside of Knoxville frightened and angered the Confederate authorities prompting them to suppress all public expressions of disloyalty and pass the Confederate Conscription Act. Conscription deeply offended Unionists, many of whom were not old enough, or wealthy enough, to avoid the draft, resulting in a hardening of their attitude. So far, the evidence in East Tennessee was that the primary beneficiary of Confederate conscription was the Union army.<sup>18</sup>

There is evidence that a "radicalization" of East Tennessee's Unionists took place that resulted from the harsh recriminations for the bridge burnings of 8 November 1861. Testimony in claims filed with the Southern Claims Commission after the war corroborates the determination of Union men who resolved they would join the Federal army. Gilbert Underdown of Knox, County responded soon after the conscription act. He maintained that Confederate policies put himself, as well as his

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<sup>16</sup> Current, 29-42.

<sup>17</sup> McKenzie, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Current, 43.

family at risk of reprisal so he decided to leave and he "organized a company for the federal army among my neighbors...I left the Confederate States [so called] at night on 13 December 1861. I left at night afoot in company with some other Union men."<sup>19</sup>

The Conscription Act of 1862 forced Andrew Swan to "leave secretly in the night. I left on foot with a shotgun on my back. I went to Kentucky for the purposes of joining the federal army and to keep out of the rebel army."<sup>20</sup> Official reports of confirm this exodus of Unionists when Knoxville commander J.P. McCowan noted with dismay "Governor Harris' and General Bragg's conscription orders have thrown the whole country into a feverish state and thousands are stampeding to the mountains and to Morgan."<sup>21</sup> McCowan's replacement at Knoxville, Samuel Jones took decisive action to round up the "disloyal and disaffected" Unionists when he sent out a detachment to "kill, capture, or disperse a party of some 200 or 300 armed men collected together in the mountains" to join the enemy in Kentucky.<sup>22</sup>

Another Knox County Unionist testified that, "he aided in the recruiting of the 9th Regiment of the Tennessee Cavalry."<sup>23</sup> He left to go to Kentucky and returned with General Burnside's to liberate Knoxville in September of 1863. He worried about recriminations against his family because of his loyalty to the Union. In order to protect them from the rebel authorities he kept his aid to the enemy a secret from his family and other loyalists in his community. A fellow Unionist and neighbor said of Thompson, "he kept his monetary contributions to the Union to himself so his family would not be injured." Jessie Simpson, a Unionist from Knox County did not leave the area but

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<sup>19</sup> Claim #19921, Gilbert Underdown, Knox County, March 11, 1876.

<sup>20</sup> Testimony of Andrew M. Swan, claim# 15167, Andrew M. Swan and D.B. Swan, Knox County, Tennessee, December 5, 1877,

<sup>21</sup> McCowan quoted in Current, 49-50.

<sup>22</sup> Jones quoted in Current, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Claim#16384, John Thompson, Knox County, October 9, 1877.

contributed to the Union cause by giving "food to the army, and supplying clothes and money to men trying to get over to the federal army." He also took great risks by concealing these men in his home until nighttime so he could ferry them across the French Broad River.<sup>24</sup>

Unionists reacted differently to the Federal occupation of Huntsville. Perhaps the most helpful strategic assistance in support of the Union invasion and occupation of Huntsville came from its own citizen J.Howard Larcombe, the Telegraph Operator. Since Huntsville had the eastern division headquarters for the Memphis & Charleston railroad it was an important objective in Union strategy in order to cut the Confederacy in half by severing the east-west rail artery that connected Chattanooga, Tennessee all the way to the Mississippi River. On the night of 10 April 1862, the eve of General Ormsby McKnight Mithel's planned invasion of Huntsville, several southern couriers arrived at the telegraph office uptown with an urgent dispatch to General Beauregard currently located at the western division in Corinth, Mississippi, that 4-5,000 Union troops were as close as Meridianville. The telegraph was to be dispatched from the uptown office where Mrs. Larcombe operated on the same circuit as the depot office where her husband Mr. Larcome had replaced the regular operator that night.<sup>25</sup> The dispatch was never sent, so as a result, the oblivious inhabitants of Huntsville were jarred awake at dawn by 5,000 undisciplined, overtaxed, and hungry troops. The treacherous Larcombe it was later discovered, also kept a journal where he had written down information about potentially dangerous rebels, and for his trouble Mitchel promptly promoted him to railroad superintendent. Many townspeople immediately suspected the Larcombes branding them as Yankees and Lincolinites.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Claim #16384, John Thompson, Knox County, October 9, 1877.; Claim #3341, Jessie Simpson, Knox, County, May 19, 1871.

<sup>25</sup> Harncourt, 177.

<sup>26</sup> Chadick, 98-99.

Since Federal forces established headquarters at Huntsville loyalists inside Union lines were protected from Confederate conscription and had access to jobs working for the Federal government. This suggests reasons why fewer Unionists from Madison County than those of East Tennessee mustered into the Federal army. Records of the Southern Claims Commission document that Unionists from the area provided other valuable services to the cause in cooperation with the post at Huntsville. Unionists Thomas McFarland, a mill owner, and local farmer Seaborn Jones, provided reliable information that helped Union soldiers undertaking reconnaissance operations. Proof of their cooperation with the Federal government appeared in records of their names found in a secret service ledger kept by Emile Bourlier, a Federal spy who worked in Huntsville.<sup>27</sup> Spies for the Union either identified themselves personally or communicated through others who vouched for them. Former slaves in the county noticed that McFarland strenuously objected to secession even before the war. The testimony of former slave George Miller established that "I knew he was a union man because I heard him say he was for the union before the war commenced," and another former slave Andrew Rogers who "lived a neighbor by" said "us colored people...thought he was one of the upright and just's men in the country" as he explained "because he had a heap of property and could own slaves but would not do it." Accordingly, McFarland developed a following of ex-slaves who testified that he spoke openly in the presence of fifteen or twenty of them at a time. Other Madison County Unionists periodically reported to the Union district command at Huntsville. According to a Madison County SCC claimant, George Mann, he would periodically show up at Huntsville and claims that, "I went out with commands to show the roads to places where they wanted to go."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Chadick, 176.

<sup>28</sup> Claim #10249, Thomas McFarland, Madison County, April 16, 1872: Testimony of George Miller and Testimony o of Andrew Rogers.; Claim #2200, George W. Mann, Madison County, August 25, 1876.

Politics in Huntsville reflected the ideology of Jacksonian-era democracy represented by the Democratic Party. North Alabama, including Madison County traditionally voted as conservative Democrats or in 1850 and 1851 as so-called Union Democrats.<sup>29</sup> However, in contrast to the other slaveholding towns of the western Tennessee Valley, Huntsville, seat of the eastern district of North Alabama hosted a Democratic States-Rights party contingent led by Clement Claiborne Clay, who incidentally cooperated with the black-belt fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey.<sup>30</sup> Some scholars attribute this faction in the area to Huntsville's settlement by Georgia's Broad River Group, a socially connected circle of wealthy land speculators, who were also important allies of Senator Clay. Throughout most of this period Northern agitation over the issue of slavery did not dominate North Alabama politics. Any agitation for secession in Alabama largely emanated from Yancey's stronghold in the black belt. Coincidentally by the 1850's a geopolitical schism that developed between the northern and southern regions of the state allowed North Alabama's conservative Democrat majority to cooperate with a minority Black-Belt Whig coalition in order to manage each antislavery crisis as it emerged until 1860. In fact, agitation for secession in 1850 met with hostile opposition from Huntsville's Whig press the *Southern Advocate* with a threat that, "If you happen to get North Alabama out of the Union, North Alabama will secede from the new Kingdom and petition to be admitted again into the Union attached to Georgia or Tennessee."<sup>31</sup>

By the time of the vote for secession at the secession convention held in Montgomery, the results demonstrate that the state of Alabama was geographically divided on the issue. North Alabama voted unanimously as cooperationist and South

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<sup>29</sup> Lewy Dorman, *Party Politics in Alabama From 1850 Through 1860*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1995), 24-25.

<sup>30</sup> Dorman, 14-16, 23-24.; A fire-eater was an extremist pro-slavery politician who advocated immediate secession from the Union.

<sup>31</sup> Dorman, 24-26.

Alabama voted for immediate secession. There were only a minority of unconditional Unionists left in North Alabama who still remained opposed to secession under any condition and even they dwindled after Lincoln won the election. Most voters sought strategies to forestall an immediate crisis. Delegates to the Convention, cooperationist candidates Nicholas Davis and Jeremiah Clemens handily defeated the secessionist candidates, George P. Beirne and Dr. M.P. Roberts. Cooperationists argued for the more moderate strategy that states should secede together in cooperation rather than individually as way to leverage power and demand further guarantees from the North. Although Nick Davis and Clemens were not enthusiastic about secession, neither the Huntsville district nor any other county in the entire state of Alabama sent an unconditionally Unionist delegate to the convention. One reason is that by 1860 the states-rights faction of the Democratic Party had successfully persuaded a large proportion of the electorate, who had heretofore confidently put their trust in the Federal Government and the Constitution to provide solutions to sectional problems, that the South faced the specter of impending doom. Even in the conservative northern section of Alabama there were not enough pro-Union men left to represent them at the convention. Some counties simply elected Union men on the Cooperationist ticket.<sup>32</sup>

Unionism in Huntsville was best exemplified by a moderate approach demonstrated by the Cooperationist Jeremiah Clemens. Motivated less by political orthodoxy than by winning an election, he astutely adopted a 'wait and see approach' to forestall disunion at least until Lincoln forced the issue by announcing the emancipation of the slaves. Since cooperationism bridged the two extremes, representing a variety of ideas about when and how to cooperate with secession, the ticket also attracted Huntsville's small but committed contingent of unconditional Unionists. Although he was a Cooperationist, Clemens signed the Ordinance of Secession anyway, albeit not without issuing a statement during the convention that

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<sup>32</sup> Dorman, 176.



rationalized his decision based on the promise that he would not have signed it if his vote made a difference in the outcome.<sup>33</sup> He also signed the "Address to the People of Alabama" which committed the signatories to "faithful and zealous support of the state in all consequences that may result from the Ordinance of Secession" and which also contained a sop to the Unionists by its commitment to the democratic principle that the ordinance should be submitted to the state for voter ratification.<sup>34</sup> The irony in putting his name down next to all of those high flown, if not contradictory principles, is Clemens's imminent desertion of his command of the Confederate militia of Alabama within one year, and at no less a rank than major-general. A result of an allegedly corrupt bargain he wrangled in exchange for his influence.

As if Clemens could not be more insufferable at this point, as soon as the Union army occupied North Alabama he was purportedly back in Huntsville acting as an advisor to the post commander at the office of the Provost Marshall, along with the unconditional-Unionist Judge George Washington Lane. Anecdotal evidence of this was found in letters written to the Huntsville native, Confederate Senator C.C. Clay, from his secessionist brother, passing this intelligence along to Senator Clay at Knoxville, Tennessee. In a letter from his desk in exile at Macon, Georgia, the intrepid editor of the *Huntsville Confederate*, J. Withers Clay penned a sarcastic reference to "Jere Clemens, Lane, & Jolly hand in glove with the Feds, hanging about the Provost Officer & apparently enjoying themselves."<sup>35</sup> While also mentioning the generous favors

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<sup>33</sup> Jeremiah Clemens, "The Disunion Movement.: How Hon. Jeremiah Clemons voted for the Secession of Alabama.", *The New York Times*, January 28, 1861, under "Archives."

<http://www.nytimes.com/1861/01/28/news/disunion-movment-hon-jeremiah-clemens-voted-for-secession-alabama.html> (accessed February 18, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> John Withers Clay to Clement C. Clay, April 1862, Clay Letters 1861-1865, Huntsville Madison County Public Library.

dispensed on behalf of friends of the Union, W. Clay goes on to say that, "Clemens had written a recommendation of Lane for Military Governor of Alabama."<sup>36</sup> All this only one year after Clemens's apoplectic reaction to President Lincoln's appointment of Judge Lane to serve as Federal Judge for the District of North Alabama prompted him to write the Confederate Secretary of War to inform him that the acceptance of this Federal appointment "was treason" and that the "'north Alabama men would gladly hang him.'"<sup>37</sup> One begins to question if Clemens's Unionism is hypocritical or he is just unstable.

Clemens and John Bell who was formerly of the Constitutional Union Party, continued to try work with the Federal government to find ways to end the war. When they attempted to act as emissaries on a trip to Washington they were instructed to return and use their influence to start a Peace Society in Huntsville.<sup>38</sup> The Rebuff by the Lincoln Administration begs the question as to whether Clemens qualifies as a Unionist, or just an opportunist. A glimpse into Clemens's theory of mind could be found in his somewhat biographical novel *Tobias Wilson*, published in 1865. It chronicled the abuse suffered by Union supporters and anti-secessionists in North Alabama during the first years of the war. Perhaps, Clemens feared for his own safety or else he never would have signed the ordinance of secession.<sup>39</sup> However, there is no doubt about Judge Lane. He was an outspoken unconditional-Unionist from the beginning until the end and never recognized secession. For this he endured the persecution of his secessionist neighbors and most especially from the exiled editor of the *Huntsville Confederate*. Dated Wednesday 3 December 1863 under the headline "Portrait of a traitor drawn

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Clemens quoted in Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (Spartanburg: The Reprint Company Publishers, 1978), 125.

<sup>38</sup> Fleming, 125

<sup>39</sup> William Warren Rogers et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 131.

from Life," J. Withers Clay scornfully rebuked Judge Lane for "sponging off of others" while living a lavish lifestyle in order to "keep up a genteel appearance."<sup>40</sup>

Unconditional Unionists in Huntsville and Madison County remained pro-Union throughout the war, even under persecution and threats by their rebel opponents. They most likely resorted to casting their lot with Jeremiah Clemens if they had any hope for representation at the Secession Convention. Unionists such as farmer George Campbell or his wealthier neighbor Archibald Steele, who both lived in the same neighborhood for years, built trust over time so they could count on each other for advice and support when talking about their increasingly unpopular opinion about secession. During the canvass on secession in late 1860 Campbell testified to the Southern Claims Commission that, "Mr. Steele said he was a union man and if the people kept changing and going over to the rebels we would all be ruined." That Mr. Campbell took the advice can be summarized by his testimony that, Mr. Steele's reputation made him a trustworthy confidant, and that "I had confidence in what he said."<sup>41</sup> Since Steele had a prosperous five hundred acre plantation and owned twenty-five slaves at the time, he must have exerted some significant influence on his less affluent neighbor.

By comparison politics in Knoxville traditionally reflected a more militant pro-Union and Whig party based ideology. This point of view was informed by its most zealously committed newsweekly, the *Knoxville Whig*. Its editor, the self-proclaimed "unconditional Unionist" leader, Parson William G. Brownlow was famous for piling on epithets to attack his enemies in the Democratic Party. In one particular issue that insulted future president Andrew Johnson, the *Whig* informed readers, "God of compassion! What could the people have been thinking of when they elected this huge mass of corruption to

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<sup>40</sup> *Huntsville Confederate*, 1863.

<sup>41</sup> Testimony of George W. Campbell, claim # 2652, Archibald J. Steele, Madison County, August 3, 1872.

Coe: Unionism in Huntsville and Knoxville: A Comparative Study of Tenn Congress!- this beast in human form" and further assaulted Johnson's character by instructing his loyal Whigs to conclude that he was fit only to "serve as one of the body guards of Belzebub![sic]." <sup>42</sup> The editor scorned the Democratic "aristocracy" in an effort not to persuade the undecided but to encourage his faithful readers, the common man. The salient point here is that Brownlow's 14,000 subscribers identified with his populist rhetoric, which underscores the character of a region where a skewed distribution of wealth lent itself well to the partisan style polemics in the *Whig*. Even in the county, populated by small holders, tenet farmers, and laborers, the top five percent of free households owned nearly two thirds of the wealth. <sup>43</sup> Certainly Parson Brownlow marshaled a powerful base of support for unconditional Unionism in East Tennessee. Notwithstanding the different circumstances in wealth and political representation between the two regions, unconditional Unionism in North Alabama was not the force of that in East Tennessee.

Ironically, Brownlow who faithfully preached his anti-secession message in 1860, either by public speaking tours or in editorials in the *Whig*, enthusiastically supported East Tennessee's proposal for independent statehood in the early 1840's. The region's political decline in the state legislature and consequent failure to secure funds for internal improvements prompted East Tennessee to question its political attachment to the rest of the state. Brownlow championed resolutions for independence, denouncing Nashville as the "seat of dictation." <sup>44</sup> Evidence that it garnered widespread support east of the Cumberland Plateau underscores a regional inferiority complex that parallels the persecution of the Unionists of East Tennessee that are portrayed in Brownlow's *Whig* by his strenuous defense of the common man. The sectional strife also parallels North Alabama's threat to secede from the rest of Alabama in 1851.

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<sup>42</sup> Brownlow quoted in McKenzie, 12.

<sup>43</sup> McKenzie, 41.

<sup>44</sup> Brownlow quoted in McKenzie, 18.

The prospect of disunion threatened to tear the country apart, and no one hated abolitionists more than Parson Brownlow, who blamed all of the big guns of anti-slavery, including Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher, Theodore Parker and others who he denounced regularly for agitating sectionalism. For several years leading up to the war the ex-circuit riding clergyman turned newspaper editor toured the North and South to speak on the topic of slavery, and argue strenuously against disunion. The famous polemicist is on record having toured Huntsville in late 1857 to exhort Unionist supporters, and others "irrespective of parties" to fight abolitionism within the Union, for the principle reason that Southerner's should not give up their rights to the national treasury, navy, and the government property.<sup>45</sup> He adroitly decoupled the issue of abolitionism with his anti-secession message. In Huntsville and the Tennessee Valley where many Unionists owned slaves he acknowledged the South's regionally universal identification of Unionism as pro-slavery by denouncing abolitionists as "infidels, as slanderers, as hypocrites, as liars, and as God-forsaken wretches."<sup>46</sup> It stands to reason that Brownlow commonly endorsed a pro slavery populism that sought to portray political conflicts as a struggle between the common people and the corrupt. Parson Brownlow's speech in Huntsville lent his unqualified endorsement of "slavery in the abstract," which made political sense to all Unionists in the Tennessee Valley.<sup>47</sup>

Despite a commonly held erroneous comparison of Knoxville with the heart of a region populated by the loyal mountaineers of East Tennessee who lived in an egalitarian society of freedom and democracy that city was divided. It represented the extreme in wealth stratification. The top five percent of free persons held nearly two thirds of all the town's wealth and property. This disproportionately small aristocracy

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<sup>45</sup> Chadick, 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> Brownlow quoted in Chadick, 15.

<sup>47</sup> McKenzie, 41.

Coe: Unionism in Huntsville and Knoxville: A Comparative Study of Tenn owned all of the slaves and represented some of the town's leading Unionists. Disaffected by Lincoln's issuance of a preliminary emancipation proclamation 22 September 1862, one of Knoxville's leading wealthy Unionists, Thomas A.R. Nelson met with Confederate commander Jones and agreed to write an address to the people of East Tennessee for public circulation. The address denounced Lincoln for the second confiscation act that freed the slaves of any person in rebellion, and proclaimed that, "he would have advocated secession had he believed it was the object of the North to subjugate the South and emancipate our slaves."<sup>48</sup> Emancipation clearly emerged as a wedge issue. Nelson also claimed that, "The Union men of East Tennessee are not now and never were Abolitionists."<sup>49</sup> A week after Nelson's address appeared in the *Knoxville Register*, the pro slavery Parson Brownlow proclaimed to an audience that he endorsed the proclamation merely as a military measure in order to punish the rebels who were responsible for the war but expressed reluctance to give slaves complete freedom. However, further evidence that a significant conflict of interest emerged over slavery is that Unionists already enlisted in the Union's Army of the Cumberland met in March 1863 to voice their approval of the Emancipation. They represented a growing Unionist population that actually advocated emancipation. They would derive great joy in "depriving the rebel master of his slaves" and other property in order to vigorously prosecute the war.<sup>50</sup> Whether out of extensive hardship under Confederate rule, military expediency or old partisan grudges, these "practical-abolitionists" wanted win the war so they could return to their homes and claim their right to take control of the reins of political power.<sup>51</sup>

Partisan conflict emanating from the *Whig* pre-figured what may have led up to the bridge burnings of November of

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<sup>48</sup> T.A.R. Nelson quoted in Current, 50.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> McKenzie, 123.

<sup>51</sup> James McPherson quoted in McKenzie, 123.

1861. Three days before the uprising Brownlow slipped out of town after an informant from Nashville warned him that charges were to be brought against him for his treasonous vituperation that the *Whig* had heaped upon the local Confederate garrison commander. With his sarcastic accusations of the local war profiteering allowed at Knoxville, compounded by a local Unionist uprising in the countryside, Brownlow forced the hand of the otherwise magnanimously tolerant *Whig*, District Commander General Felix Zollicoffer who declared martial law and ordered the parson's arrest along with hundreds of other political prisoners that were dragged in from the countryside. Evidence points to the fact that Brownlow had no knowledge of the planned attacks but with his *Whig* privileges suspended and threatened with exile, the parson went north to serve his cause. So much for Zollicoffer's version of the "Rosewater policy."<sup>52</sup>

In comparison, Unionists in Huntsville and Knoxville, sympathized or aligned themselves with the Union not so much by their incorporation of national patriotism, as much as by their overlapping, and intertwined relationships with Unionists and others in their community. Unionists identified their loyalty not by their state of mind, but by the way they behaved within the wider community of families, neighbors, churches, and political party associations.<sup>53</sup> In Huntsville after the war commenced, connections between unionists changed, and clear-cut racial and class boundaries became blurred by the need to coalesce around a common cause.

In contrast however, the division within the ranks of Knoxville's Unionists over Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves underscores the differences between Knoxville and Huntsville. The "radically abolitionized" group of men who served in the

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<sup>52</sup> The Rosewater policy is a reference to the Union high command's embrace of lenience toward slaveholders in the occupied garrisoned towns of the South. In this instance the Confederate high command used a similar approach, in hopes that they would win the hearts and minds of the Unionist contingent that remained at the CSA garrison in Knoxville.

<sup>53</sup> McKenzie, 232.

Union army who suffered the most from the war charged their stay at home critics with opportunism. Their divisions erupted over the pre-existing class-consciousness when the war overturned the racial hierarchy.<sup>54</sup>

In summary, Unionists in both towns could not be identified by a so-called "loyal state of mind." Unionism could not be defined as commitment that superseded all other connections to the state, community, or family. It is just as likely that opposition to secession in East Tennessee and North Alabama was not just about loyalty to the Union but also about an incorporation of other bonds, rather than a way to supersede local and familial bonds that Unionists truly did hold dear.

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<sup>54</sup> McKenzie, 189.