

CIVIL WAR TRAVELER

2011

Volume 14

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1861

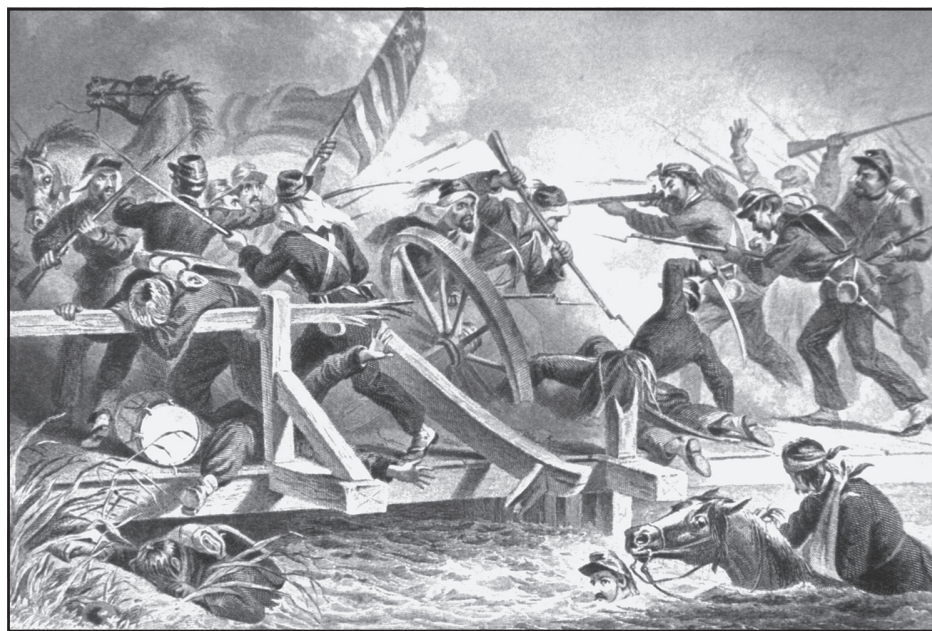
150 YEARS LATER

The year 1861 had barely opened and things were spinning out of control and beginning to take shape at the same time. By the end of January 1861, five states had joined South Carolina, declaring themselves out of the Union. Texas followed Feb. 1.

But as one Union was falling apart, another was being created. On Feb. 8 a convention of the seceded states, meeting in Montgomery, Ala., adopted a constitution for the new Confederate States. Jefferson Davis was elected provisional president the next day.

Looking back 150 years later, the pace of events in early 1861 is dizzying. It took less than two months from the secession of South Carolina to the formation of the Southern confederacy. And barely two months after that, the opening shots of the Civil War were fired in Charleston Harbor.

The explosion seemed to come so quickly, but it surprised few at the time. The fuse on this time bomb had been burning for generations. Compromise after compromise had delayed it, but the issue of slavery and its



Battle of First Manassas (19th-century engraving)

expansion finally proved too much for America's political system to swallow. And some Americans were about to pay with their lives.

If anything, the pace of events quickened after the opening shots were fired at Fort Sumter April 12. Three days later President Abraham

Lincoln, after a little more than a month in office, issued a call for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the "combinations" now making war against the United States. That proclamation didn't sit well with Virginia. A convention meeting in Richmond, which until then had resisted seces-

sion, voted overwhelmingly April 17 to leave the Union. And two days after that, some of those troops responding to Lincoln's call, were caught up in a deadly riot in Baltimore.

In May, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina seceded, and more blood was shed in Missouri. Southern states moved rapidly to take over Federal forts and other installations. Union soldiers marched into Northern Virginia after state voters ratified secession May 23 and the Confederate capital moved to Richmond.

Things got a lot more serious – and deadly – in June. More-or-less organized fighting in Fairfax, Philippi and Big Bethel, Va., claimed lives.

By July, the public and politicians on both sides expected something big to happen. One battle, some thought, would end it all. A series of Union successes in western Virginia (later West Virginia) whetted the Northern appetite for a decisive victory. The actions there made Union Gen. George McClellan one of the first national heroes of the war.

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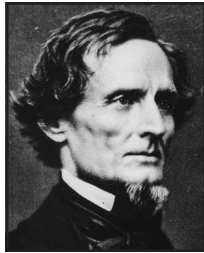
★ ★ 1861 TIMELINE ★ ★

JANUARY

- 9 Mississippi secedes, shots fired at the Star of the West in Charleston Harbor
- 10 Florida secedes
- 11 Alabama secedes
- 19 Georgia secedes
- 26 Louisiana secedes

FEBRUARY

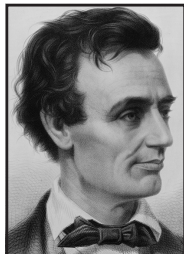
- 1 Texas secedes
- 8 Convention of seceded states meeting in Montgomery (AL) adopts constitution
- 9 Montgomery convention elects Jefferson Davis provisional president



Davis

MARCH

- 4 Lincoln inaugurated in Washington DC



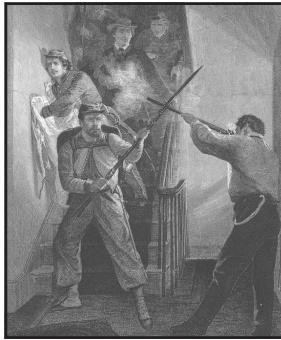
Lincoln

APRIL

- 12 First shots fired at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, Union garrison surrenders after a 34-hour bombardment.
- 15 Lincoln issues call for 75,000 militia
- 17 Virginia Convention votes to secede. Sets popular referendum for May 23
- 19 Baltimore (MD) Riot

MAY

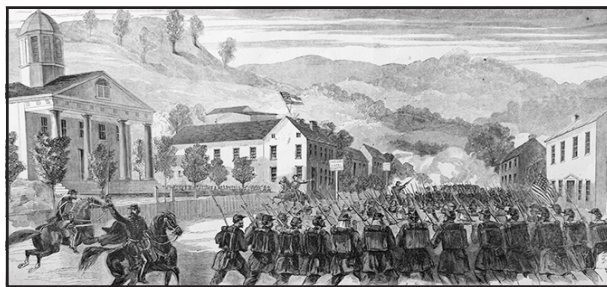
- 6 Arkansas and Tennessee secede
- 20 North Carolina secedes
- 24 Federal troops enter Alexandria (VA) the day after Virginia secession is ratified by voters. Capt. Elmer Ellsworth, a friend of Lincoln's, is killed while removing a Confederate flag from a hotel there. Union Gen. Ben Butler at Fort Monroe (VA) declares escaped slaves "contraband of war" and refuses to return them.
- 29 President Jefferson Davis arrives in the new Confederate capital, Richmond (VA)



Death of Ellsworth

JUNE

- 1 Skirmish in Fairfax (VA). Confederate Capt. John Q. Marr killed
- 3 Battle of Philippi (VA, now WVA)
- 10 Battle of Big Bethel (VA)



Battle of Philippi

JULY

- 4 Lincoln calls on Congress to authorize 400,000 men and \$400 million to make "this contest a short, and a decisive one"
- 5 Battle at Carthage (MO)
- 11 Battle of Rich Mountain (VA, now WVA)
- 13 Battle at Corrick's Ford (VA, now WVA)
- 18 Battle at Blackburn's Ford (VA)
- 21 Battle of First Manassas (Bull Run)

AUGUST

- 2 Congress in Washington passes first income tax
- 10 Battle of Wilson's Creek (MO)
- 27-28 Attack and Union capture of Hatteras Island (NC) forts

SEPTEMBER

- 3 Confederates enter Kentucky, ending that state's neutrality
- 10 Battle of Carnifex Ferry (VA, now WVA)
- 20 Federals surrender at Lexington (MO)

OCTOBER

- 21 Battle of Ball's Bluff (VA)

NOVEMBER

- 6 Jefferson Davis elected to six-year term
- 7 Battles of Port Royal (SC) and Belmont (MO)
- 26 A convention in Wheeling (VA, now WVA) adopts constitution for future state of West Virginia

DECEMBER

- 13 Federal attack defeated at Camp Alleghany (VA, now WVA)

Source: *The Civil War Day by Day* by E.B. Long

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1861: 150 YEARS LATER

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The big battle finally came July 21 when two inexperienced armies clashed 20 miles west of Washington. The First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) certainly was big by 1861 standards. More than 800 men were killed out of nearly 4,500 casualties suffered. The bloodshed during this stunning Confederate victory shocked the Union and woke both sides to the fact that this was going to be a longer, much bloodier war than most had anticipated.

Another big battle Aug. 10, far to the west at Wilson's Creek near Spring-

field, Mo., produced another Confederate victory.

A ray of hope for the Union came in late August as Federal amphibious operations began to nibble away at North Carolina's Atlantic coast. Confederate forts fell at Hatteras Island, giving Union troops a North Carolina beachhead that they would exploit in 1862.

Events seemed to slow down a little after the bloodbath at Manassas. McClellan took command of the Union army around Washington and began a very slow rehabilitation of the demoralized troops. The Confederates fortified their positions in Northern Virginia

and continued aggressive action in Missouri and elsewhere.

Hard fighting flared briefly in the East during the fall months with another Confederate victory Oct. 21 at Ball's Bluff near Leesburg, Va. That defeat was offset somewhat by a Union victory at Port Royal in early November, another Union Atlantic coast nibble, this time in South Carolina.

This most eventful year ended with America mired in uncertainty. What would this thing become? Was there still room for talk, compromise? The bristling, growing armies on both sides seemed to suggest not. ■

EASTERN

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