

Georgia secession rooted in Lincoln's election

Georgia somewhat reluctantly joined other Southern states in seceding from the Union 151 years ago on January 19, 1861.

Carlton Fletcher
carlton.fletcher@albanyherald.com

ALBANY — For the better part of 150 years, history has proclaimed that Georgia leaders' decision on this date in 1861 to secede from the United States was about its citizens' right to own slaves.

Certainly the millions of dollars invested in slave labor was a crucial economic factor for all 11 of the official Confederate States of America that chose the path of secession, but the continued study of historical documents from that era — particularly by Southern scholars — shows that such reasoning discounts factors far removed from the slavery/anti-slavery cause and effect.

"The key to understanding secession is to look at the mindset of the people of that era, not what anyone in the year 2012 might think," Bernhard Thuersam, a native of Niagara Falls, N.Y., and the chairman of the North Carolina War Between the States Sesquicentennial Commission, said. "By looking at diaries, letters, post-war recollections — historical documents from just before, during and just after the war — you see things through the eyes of the people of that era.

"Then you start to get a true perspective. And it's clear that the South — and Georgia — did not secede merely over the issue of slavery."

When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860 with only slightly more than 39 percent of the popular vote but with an overwhelming Electoral College majority, the dominoes of secession started falling. South Carolina was first to break from the Union on Dec. 20, 1860, and Mississippi followed on Jan. 9, 1861.

The next day, Florida followed suit when its governor, Madison Starke Perry, declared, "Florida may be unwilling to subject herself to the charge of temerity or immodesty by leading off but will most assuredly cooperate with or follow the lead of any single Cotton State which may secede."

Alabama was the next Confederate state to withdraw from the Union, voting to secede on Jan. 11. Although Georgia followed suit on the 19th, it was clear by the 89 "no" votes of its delegates that the Peach State was not as anxious to pull out of the Union as some of its sister states.

"Georgia actually tended to vote more with the New England states that, with Lincoln, essentially pulled off an illegal military coup in America," former professor and current Executive Director of the Virginia Heritage Foundation Timothy Manning said. "There were influential Georgians like Alexander Stephens (later the vice president of the Confederacy), Herschel Johnson and Benjamin Hill who were opposed to secession, but the election of Lincoln was a crucial factor in the Southern states' decision (to secede)."

Indeed, secessionist Robert Toombs boldly told Georgia delegates in a fiery speech at the state's convention "Give me the sword! But if you do not place it in my hands, before God I will take it!"

Louisiana voted for secession on Jan. 26, and while Texas' convention delegates voted to secede from the Union on Feb. 1, the Lone Star State held a referendum on Feb. 23 and its populace voted by a 76 percent margin to approve the action of its leaders.

Shortly after Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1861, Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, and the new president's response was to send 75,000 troops to "suppress the insurrection." His actions led Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee and North Carolina to secede from the Union, and the American Civil War that had been brewing inevitably followed.

The "Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies," or OR, notes: "The

people of Georgia , having dissolved their political connection with the Government of the United States of America , present to their confederates and the world the causes which have led to the separation. For the last 10 years we have had numerous and serious causes of complaint against our non-slaveholding confederate States with reference to the subject of African slavery. They have endeavored to weaken our security, to disturb our domestic peace and tranquility, and persistently refused to comply with their express constitutional obligations to us in reference to that property, and by the use of their power in the Federal Government have striven to deprive us of an equal enjoyment of the common Territories of the Republic.

"This hostile policy of our confederates has been pursued with every circumstance of aggravation which could arouse the passions and excite the hatred of our people, and has placed the two sections of the Union for many years past in the condition of virtual civil war. Our people, still attached to the Union from habit and national traditions, and averse to change, hoped that time, reason, and argument would bring, if not redress, at least exemption from further insults, injuries and dangers. Recent events have fully dissipated all such hopes and demonstrated the necessity of separation. Our Northern confederates, after a full and calm hearing of all the facts, after a fair warning of our purpose not to submit to the rule of the authors of all these wrongs and injuries, have by a large majority committed the Government of the United States into their hands. The people of Georgia , after an equally full and fair and deliberate hearing of the case, have declared with equal firmness that they shall not rule over them."

Manning, who was educated in Michigan, served as a minister in Ohio and taught at colleges in Washington, D.C., contends the accepted delineation of "North vs. South" that has emerged in historical accounts of the war are inaccurate.

"If you look at primary sources, and in particular the OR, you find lots of inaccuracies in that Northern states versus Southern states line of thinking," he said. "You see that there were actually 20 states — the 11 official Confederate states, the four border states that Lincoln invaded early to head off secession, West Virginia, Delaware, the Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona territories — that opposed the Union Army.

"What's not so well known is that seven Democratic northern states, including New York , Pennsylvania , Indiana , Ohio , Michigan , Illinois and Wisconsin , actively opposed Lincoln and took up arms against the Union . The OR shows two significant facts: That 80 percent of the warfare of the Union Army was carried out against civilians — including torture, which is never talked about — to demoralize the South, and that 50 percent of the Union's troops were dispatched to fight northern citizens who'd taken up arms against the North."

James King, the commander of the Albany Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp, said in a recent article that while "New England greed, New England radicals, New England fanatics, New England zealots and New England hypocrites" were the human elements responsible for the Civil War, his research points to a number of root causes that led to secession.

"In actuality, if you look at the causes of the war, it's a simple matter," King said. "The North wanted the goods it got from the South for pennies on the dollar, and the South simply fought against an invading army.

"But there were some very clear reasons Georgia and other Southern states seceded."

King's list of the 10 primary causes of secession includes excessive tariffs, centralization vs. states' rights, Christianity vs. secular humanism, cultural differences, control of western territories, Northern industrialists' desire for southern resources, slander of the South by Northern newspapers, attempts by New Englanders to instigate slave rebellion, slavery and northern aggression.

"What many don't realize is that a majority of Northern politicians supported acts of terrorism; 68 of 117 actually signed a document advocating terroristic activity against Southern citizens," King said. "Most educated Southerners of that time favored gradual emancipation of slaves and knew the institution of

slavery would soon be dead.

"But what they could not abide was the unconstitutional acts carried out by Lincoln and the New Englanders who treated the South as an agricultural colony with the intent to bleed it dry. Their acts were not only immoral, they went against the very constitution upon which the Union was founded."

Thuersam, the native New Yorker who jokingly refers to himself as "Dances with Wolves" in that he grew to not only understand but agree with the Southern perspective on the Civil War after serving at Army bases in Alabama, Kentucky and Georgia, said many of the accepted factors surrounding the Civil War that are being called into question by current historians come from a refusal — particularly by Northerners — to "look at that era, warts and all."

"Surely the South invested millions of dollars in slave labor," he said, "but many seem to overlook the fact that most of the slave ships were outfitted and financed by northern traders. The North has done a good job over the years of covering its footsteps in the slave trade."

"Many influential Georgia leaders of that era — Toombs, Hill, (Henry) Benning, Stephens, Johnson, (Howell) Cobb, (Joseph) Brown — were opposed to secession, but what they saw was only intense sectional hostility; what they didn't see were practical and peaceful solutions from abolitionists to end the slavery controversy without bloodshed. Those Georgia leaders wanted peaceful settlement of the question, but got nothing but hatred, the inciting of slave insurrection and murder instead. They did what any sane person would do: sever ties with the fanatics to the North who threatened the peace and form their own political union, as proclaimed in Jefferson's Declaration, with those they had something in common with."

"A more perfect union is what they were after, and with the consent of the governed."
