

THE CIVIL WAR—150 YEARS AGO

By William Baillie

The year 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the most wrenching war in our country's history, The War Between the States. We mark the observance by looking at the response here in Columbia County in the months of March, April and May of 1861. We can gauge local opinion by quoting typical passages from the editorial pages of the county's newspapers at the time. The *Columbia Democrat* and *The Star of the North* represent majority Democratic opinion in those months. Unfortunately, the opposition paper at the time, the *Columbia County Republican*, has no surviving issues for those months, but several times its editor's assertions were quoted by the rivals, providing us with some sense of its positions on basic issues.

Even before Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as the Sixteenth President, the threat of Republican policies caused seven Southern states to secede from the Union. When those states seized federal forts and arsenals within their boundaries, Lincoln faced a major crisis as soon as he took office. When the U.S. Army commander of one site, Fort Sumter at Charleston, South Carolina, refused to surrender the installation to state forces, the Confederates opened fire on the fort with sixteen cannon in the pre-dawn hours of April 12, 1861, and thus began the Civil War.

Here in Columbia County, Republican policies were opposed by a large majority of citizens. In the presidential election of November, 1860, Pennsylvania voted 44% for Lincoln against three Democratic opponents, and Columbia County similarly gave Lincoln's three opponents a majority of its votes. Six months later, however, when war broke out and President Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 volunteer militia, Columbia Countians responded as patriotically as people anywhere, quickly raising men and supplies for two companies of soldiers. The two Democratic papers, which had fiercely opposed Lincoln's election and Republican policies, quickly performed an about-face and supported the use of military force against the Southern states—and in this turnabout those two editors were reflecting a

change in the sentiments of most Columbia County citizens.

Once the War began, both sides expected a quick victory. At first glance, the North seemed to have the advantage: the Confederacy had 12 states with a population of 9 million (including 4 million slaves), while the Union had 20 states and a population of over 20 million. The North had most of the country's industry and transportation—canals and railroads—while the South was chiefly agricultural. The Union had a Navy which could, and did, blockade Southern ports, preventing the South from exporting cotton or importing vital supplies.

But the War dragged on, with one huge, bloody battle after another, until there were over 600,000 killed on the two sides. Here in Columbia County, vocal opposition to the War and especially to the draft gained strength until finally the county was “invaded” by Union troops to quell a supposed rebellion. While no North-South battles occurred here, the War was very much to the forefront in the thoughts and lives of all Columbia County people 150 years ago.

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NATIONAL NEWS

November 6, 1860 – Abraham Lincoln, Republican, wins the Presidential election against 3 Democratic candidates, with just 39 percent of the popular vote.

December 20, 1860 - South Carolina secedes from the Union, followed within two months by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas.

February 9, 1861 - The Confederate States of America is formed with Jefferson Davis, a former U.S. Army officer, as President.

March 4, 1861 - Abraham Lincoln is sworn in as 16th President of the United States of America. In his inaugural speech he says he has no intention of ending slavery, and he hopes the national crisis can be ended without war.

April 12, 1861 - Confederates open fire with 50 cannons upon Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. The Fort surrenders on April 14.

April 15, 1861 - President Lincoln issues a Proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteer militiamen.

April 17, 1861 - Virginia secedes from the Union, followed within five weeks by Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina.

April 19, 1861 - President Lincoln issues a Proclamation of Blockade against Southern ports. Throughout the war the blockade remains generally effective, preventing the South from exporting much cotton or importing vital supplies.

- Union troops marching through Baltimore are attacked by a pro-Southern mob; 4 soldiers and 12 civilians are killed.

May 24, 1861 – Union troops cross the Potomac and capture the area around Alexandria, Virginia.

May 29, 1861 – Richmond, Virginia is chosen as the capital of the Confederacy.

LOCAL NEWS

November 6, 1860 – Lincoln wins Pennsylvania's 27 electoral votes with 44% of the popular vote. Pennsylvania elects Andrew Curtin as its first Republican Governor.

April, 1861 – Two companies of Volunteers are being raised locally, the *Iron Guards* under Capt. W. W. Ricketts and the *Columbia Artillerists* under Capt. J. D. Melick; Lieut. Col. W. H. Ent, Pennsylvania militia general staff, is on active duty.

April 18, 1861 – A public meeting is held at the Court House to “make provisions for the Volunteer companies from this county”; on various dates, similar meetings occur at Catawissa, Sugar Loaf, Light Street, etc.

May 4, 1861 – The *Columbia Democrat* says “BLOOMSBURG has worn a war-like appearance, for the last ten days, and may be compared to a Military Camp.”

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THE LOCAL PRESS IN 1861

Mr. Lincoln's Recklessness of Assertion

The heresies and crudities of Mr. LINCOLN'S Inaugural are sufficiently revolting to men of taste, as well as to all patriotic instincts; but he does not seem to think so, for to these blemishes he superadds the utterance of a deliberate and audacious untruth. Look, for instance, at the following passage:

"Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States, that by the accession of a Republican Administration, their property, and their peace and personal security are to be endangered. *There never has been any reasonable cause for such apprehension. Indeed, the most ample evidence to the contrary has been open to their inspection.*"

Who could have believed that there is a man living, who . . . would have the hardihood to make the bold and reckless assertions contained in the above paragraph? . . .

--*Pennsylvanian*

[*Star of the North*, March 13, 1861]

The Stars & Stripes – forever.

So far our efforts have been for peace. —

To the extent of our humble abilities we have labored to avoid and avert a civil war! We have failed! *The War has begun!*

And now, that it has begun, there is but one thing for us to do, and that is "TO STAND FAST BY THE OLD FLAG," as she now waves in front of our office, between the Court House and Exchange Hotel, and see that she never goes down before any enemy, native or foreign. The Federal Government must be sustained; and we shall not stop to inquire who is in default. Let the campaign be pushed vigorously—let it be short, and decisive. The first gun was fired by the Secessionists, and it may be that forbearance has ceased to be a virtue. We are for an undivided country, if

that be possible; but if not, then wherever the Star Spangled Banner waves, let it wave in triumph and honor.

[*Columbia Democrat*, April 20, 1861]

Latest by Telegraph.

FROM THE SEAT OF WAR!

THE BOMBARDMENT.

FORT SUMPTER ON FIRE!

FORT SUMPTER SURRENDERED!

Previous to the beginning of hostilities, Gen. Beauregard informed the Secretary of War, of the Confederate States, that he had notification that the [U.S.] administration had determined to throw supplies into Fort Sumpter at all hazards. The Secretary replied that if the information was reliable, he, Beauregard, should demand Maj. Anderson's surrender. That was done.— Maj. Anderson declined to surrender.— Beauregard was then ordered to proceed as he deemed advisable, to reduce it. Accordingly at 27 minutes till 4 in the morning of Saturday April 12, a fire was opened on Fort Sumpter. We give the telegraphic dispatches for the rest of news, and shall as soon as possible lay before our readers the connected official report. . . .

[*Columbia Democrat*, April 20, 1861]

[*The editor of the Columbia Democrat, Levi E. Tate, was on a scheduled trip by train to Philadelphia via Scranton and New York City. The paper published his letters describing his experiences, including this evocation of war fever along the way:*]

. . . The war excitement, all along the line of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, was intensely overwhelming, nor was it at all abated in New

York City. We just arrived in time to witness the departure of a regiment of 1,000 Troops from New York for Washington. It was indeed a grand scene—a solemn procession—to see an army of brave young men, in martial array, moving in solid column to obey the call of the Country and to redress the grievance inflicted upon the “Stars and Stripes.” Since that time, at least 10,000 more Troops, from New York, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts, have passed through this City for the Seat of War. . . .

[*Columbia Democrat*, April 27, 1861]

[*In the weeks before the firing on Fort Sumter, the Columbia Democrat had generally urged avoidance of war as the only sane course, but after that event the editor supported the President’s call for militia. The rival Columbia County Republican tweaked the editor for his change of course in these words:*]

Our neighbor of the *Democrat* made a capital speech at the meeting in the Court House on Friday evening last. Col. TATE is now with us [*i.e., pro-War Republicans*] and declares that he will stand by the Government in this hour of national danger.

[*In the Democratic paper, editor Tate quoted the above and responded:*]

We are precisely where we have been for over thirty years, square upon the Democratic platform, and always in support of every just war in which our country has engaged. And, without stopping to enquire into the causes which superinduced this war, we are with our true and trusty friends in defence of the national Flag. . . .

[*Columbia Democrat*, May 4, 1861]

[*Typical of reports of meetings held around Columbia County to foster support for troops is the following item:*]

A Meeting in Sugarloaf

A call for the freemen of Sugarloaf township, was issued on Monday, April 22d, to meet at A. Cole’s School House, to show their devotion for the Union. In response to this call, a large number of citizens assembled on Wednesday the 24th [April], at 2 o’clock P.M. The meeting was organized by appointing the following officers:

President—ORIN PARK

Vice Presidents:

Jacob Harrington, Jesse Hartman,
Redman Betterly, Washington Sutliff.

Secretary—Josiah Fritz.

On motion of T. Q. A. Stevens, the proceedings of the meeting held at Bloomsburg, on the 18th [April], were read, and the resolutions with Col. L. L. Tate’s letter, were unanimously adopted. The meeting was addressed by Oren Park, Esq., and Capt. John Seeley, both highly patriotic. The meeting was composed of both parties, with strong Union sentiments. Put Sugarloaf right on the Union.

[*Columbia Democrat*, May 4, 1861]

[*Governor Curtin’s message to the Pennsylvania Senate and House on April 30 provides a sample of typical Republican rhetoric about this “just” war:*]

The time is past for temporizing or forbearing with this rebellion—the most causeless in history. The North has not invaded, nor has she sought to invade, a single guaranteed right of the South. On the contrary, all political parties and all administrations have fully recognized the binding force of every profession of the great compact between the States; and, regardless of our views of State policy, our people have respected them. To predicate a rebellion,

therefore, upon any alleged wrong inflicted, or sought to be inflicted upon the South, is to offer falsehood as an apology for treason. So will the civilized world and history judge this mad effort to overthrow the most beneficent structure of human government ever devised by man.

[*Columbia Democrat*, May 11, 1861]