

## CONCLUSION: DISINTEGRATION OF THE FLOYD COUNTY HOMEFRONT

When the War cloud of the sixties cast its shadow over our land, a number of our young men went to the battles' front, never to return. Their loss was keenly felt, yet through the faithfulness of those who remained, a brighter day dawned.

Reverend J. D. Utt, *Zion's Centennial Celebration, 1813-1913, Floyd County, Virginia* (1913)

The homefront in Floyd County continued a downward spiral in the months following Jefferson Davis's failure to suspend habeas corpus in the Confederacy. Although it is unlikely the suspension would have significantly reversed disloyal behavior among residents of Floyd, with habeas corpus in place they could continue participating in disloyal activity with little fear of legal prosecution. Early in 1865, the Confederacy abandoned most efforts to restore its disintegrating homefront. This left Floyd's disloyal and Unionist residents in control of their county's fate throughout the remainder of the war.

In early April, 1865, Major-General George Stoneman's Federal cavalry raided Floyd and signaled the end of even theoretical Confederate control of the county. Stoneman's cavalry, although en route to block the Army of Northern Virginia from its move toward Danville, remained in Floyd long enough to seize needed supplies and confiscate fresh horses. Floyd's loyal Confederates, sensing an inevitable end to the war, offered only minimal armed resistance against the Federal raiders. Those who did challenge the cavalry's superior numbers and firepower, like former 42nd Virginia lieutenant James M. Howard, were captured, or killed like Howard.<sup>1</sup> Floyd's Unionist community, recognizing the raid as a sign of the end to the Confederacy, "came to rejoice that the Yankees were there" at last.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, Unionist sentiments alone did little to protect Floyd's Unionist residents from pillaging conducted by Stoneman's forces. In the "haste, bustle, and confusion" of

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<sup>1</sup>Howard was discharged from the Confederate military in 1862 and killed in Floyd County by Stoneman's troops on 2 April 1865, see John D. Chapla, *42nd Virginia Infantry* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, 1983), 99.

<sup>2</sup>W. Edward Howery, "Personal Reminiscences," in Amos D. Wood, *Floyd County: A History of its People and Places* (Radford, Va.: Commonwealth Press, 1981), 383-384.

the raid, dozens of local anti-Confederates lost provisions and horses to the troops.<sup>3</sup> Most of the county's Unionists pleaded with the Federal forces; but like Elijah Hylton, who lost two gray mares, 200 pounds of bacon, and 30 bushels of corn to the cavalry, they found their pleas largely ignored.<sup>4</sup> Some of the county's staunchest Unionist residents were violently harassed and mistreated by Stoneman's troops. H. O. A. member Robert Whitlow was robbed at gun-point by a group of Federal stragglers and several of the county's former slaves.<sup>5</sup> The raid, nevertheless, effectively ended Confederate control of the region and left the county's Union supporters as "victors" in a war with few real winners in Floyd.

Civil War bitterly divided the residents of Floyd County and ultimately generated an inner civil war within the community. The wartime conflict among Floyd's white citizens deeply contrasted their pre-Civil War history of cohesion, cooperation, and solidarity. From formation of the county in 1831 through an economic boom during the 1850s, citizens had worked together to better their mountaintop community, cooperated to bring much needed transportation improvements to the region, and profited together from the economic gains that resulted. They worshipped together, provided for each other in times of need, helped raise neighbors' barns, swapped labor, and enjoyed each other's company. However, the war dramatically shattered this pattern of cohesion and left Floyd's residents profoundly and painfully divided.

Lincoln's election and events at Fort Sumter forced allegiance decisions by most Floyd County residents. Virginia's secession vote brought many local loyalty divisions to the surface in Floyd and resulted in widespread intimidation and violence at the polls. County residents initially embraced Virginia's secession, and hundreds of local men rushed to enlist in Floyd's newly forming Confederate infantry companies. However, their pro-secession reaction was contrasted by a minority of the community who chose to remain loyal to the United States, refused to enlist in the Confederate military, and openly resisted their new Confederate government. These residents revealed the first local signs of disloyalty to the Confederacy and foreshadowed a community-wide trend toward extreme Confederate disaffection that grew in magnitude and became far more hostile.

Nearly 23 percent of Confederate enlistees and conscripts from Floyd County deserted their units during the war; a desertion rate double the state average and nearly three times the Confederate norm. Soldiers from the county started deserting as early as

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<sup>3</sup>The description of the raid is from Phillip Ratliff's wife Pricillia, quoted in Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 233, Claim Number 3491, National Archives of the United States, Washington, D.C.; all the post war claims filed with the claims commission by Floyd residents were for reimbursement of property seized by Stoneman's forces in April, 1865. See all Floyd County claims to the commission in Record Group 217 and Record Group 233, National Archives.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim Number 17710.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, Record Group 217, Claim 2091.

June, 1861, and continued deserting in steadily increasing numbers throughout the remainder of the war. In Floyd, the local deserters organized gangs for protection, received widespread support from much of the community, and conflicted violently with the county's Confederate loyalists. Floyd's actively disloyal Unionist residents welcomed and assisted local deserters, fed both them and their families, offered shelter and protection, and sometimes even hired the county's runaway soldiers as day laborers. Family, friends, and neighbors also fed and safeguarded local deserters, allowing them to survive in mountain hideaways and elude Confederate forces sent to arrest them. The passively disloyal aid of kinfolk and friends was viewed by the county's pro-Confederates as parallel to the active disloyalty of Unionists and as blatantly traitorous to the Southern cause. Community support of local deserters promoted desertion among Floyd's Confederate troops, provoked a violent reaction from the county's Confederate loyalist residents, and prompted a hostile response from the Virginia and Confederate governments. The varied responses of residents to deserters living in the community profoundly divided Floyd, created a climate of increasing violence and turmoil among its inhabitants, and eventually resulted in Floyd County's collapse as a positive portion of the Southern homefront.

The Unionist community in Floyd aided local deserters, attempted to spread Confederate disaffection, joined covert peace societies, provided intelligence and support for Federal troops, conflicted bitterly with local Confederate loyalists, and contributed to the disintegration of Floyd's Confederate homefront. The local Unionists avoided military service, assisted Confederate draft dodgers across Federal lines, and eventually organized a "Union Guard" unit to respond to harassment by Confederate military forces. They were elected as county magistrates and used the position to supply deserters' families with Confederate aid and to spread Confederate disaffection among residents. Many of Floyd's Unionists also joined the Heroes of America and afterwards successfully spread the society's doctrine among county troops and used the order to issue death threats to local Confederates. These activities incited a furious response from Floyd's loyal Confederate residents, the wartime governors of Virginia, and Confederate authorities. However, their collective pro-Confederate reaction did little to stem the tide of disaffection, disloyalty, and Unionism in Floyd, and instead served only to hasten the collapse of the county as a positive portion of the homefront.

Floyd County's value as a section of the Confederate homefront declined throughout the Civil War. The combined attempts of local loyalists, Virginia's governors, and Confederate authorities to return the county as a positive portion of the Southern homefront failed. Loyalty division among Floyd residents progressively widened throughout the war, left the community profoundly separated, and transformed Floyd into a decidedly negative portion of the Confederate homefront known as Sisson's Kingdom. Floyd's disloyalists, Unionists, and deserters created a myriad of difficulties for Virginia's wartime governors, forcing both to exhaust valuable time attempting to slow or reverse the growing trend of disloyalty within the community. The widespread disloyal activity in Floyd also forced the Confederate government to engage its officials and military personnel in actions designed to reinstate the community as a useful portion of the

Confederate homefront, making the county's population an overall hindrance to the Confederate war effort and a minute element contributing to the South's eventual defeat.

Since the record of Floyd County's residents during the Civil War forms a component of the collective chronicle of the war in southwest Virginia, studies addressing the Confederate loyalties of the region's residents offer a better understanding of Floyd. Henry T. Shanks and Kenneth W. Noe, who provide the two most well known examinations of loyalties in the region, reach contrasting conclusions about Confederate disloyalty in southwest Virginia. Civil War Floyd County, while not entirely representative of southwest Virginia during the war, can be used to gauge the validity of arguments presented in both examinations.

The general attitudes of southwest Virginian's during the war, according to Henry Shanks, underwent "a gradual change in sentiment from great enthusiasm for the Southern cause in 1861 to moderate loyalty in 1862, indifference in 1863, opposition in 1864, and open rebellion in 1865."<sup>6</sup> While the activities of Floyd County's residents in 1861 and 1862 support much of Shanks' interpretation, by 1863 the county's residents were participating in activity that impeded the Confederate war effort, and by 1864 many of its inhabitants were already in "open rebellion" against the Confederacy. Thus, on the basis of the Shanks timetable, residents of Floyd County moved from Confederate enthusiasm to Confederate disloyalty more rapidly and in a more pronounced fashion than inhabitants of other southwest Virginia counties.

Kenneth Noe, in a revision of the Shanks study, dismisses interpretations that suggest extensive Confederate disloyalty by the region's residents. In "Red String Scare: Civil War Southwest Virginia and the Heroes of America" (1991), Noe argues that southwest Virginians were no more loyal or less loyal than other residents of the state, that they suffered from a severe form of war weariness, and that their apathy was misdiagnosed by the Confederate government as a form of disloyalty. Accusing Shanks of "uncritically" accepting the findings of the 1864 Confederate investigation of the H.O.A. in the region, Noe suggests that, because "Richmond greatly overestimated the extent of Red String activity in southwest Virginia," Shanks made the same error.<sup>7</sup> While Noe's skepticism of intelligence gathered by Confederate authorities is justifiable, his dismissal of the possibility for extensive membership in the H.O.A. by southwest Virginians is less convincing.

Noe uses the widespread failure of the Republican party in southwest Virginia during Reconstruction, a lack of claims to the Southern Claims Commission from the

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<sup>6</sup>Henry T. Shanks, "Disloyalty to the Confederacy in Southwestern Virginia, 1861-1865," *North Carolina Historical Review* 21 (April 1944): 123.

<sup>7</sup>Noe, "Red String Scare: Civil War Southwest Virginia and the Heroes of America," *North Carolina Historical Review* 69 (July 1992): 319.

region's Unionists, and an assertion that only one claimant referred to the H.O.A. in testimony, as collective evidence against either extensive H.O.A. membership or Confederate disloyalty by southwest Virginians. These same criteria, according to Noe, should reveal only limited participation in the H.O.A. by Floyd County's Confederate inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> Instead, however, all three of Noe's standards indicate county residents were widely affiliated with the society. The Republican party, despite an overall lack of success in Reconstruction era southwest Virginia, was remarkably successful in Floyd, where residents elected a "Radical" Republican as their sheriff in 1865 and as their delegate to Virginia's constitutional convention in 1867.<sup>9</sup> Twenty-one percent of the 220 claims filed by southwest Virginians with the Southern Claims Commission were made by Floyd County's wartime residents, indicating that Unionism was more pervasive there than anywhere else in the region. Claims Commission testimony from Floyd County residents, despite Noe's assertion to the contrary, contains numerous overt references to membership in the H.O.A., the Red String League, and a secret Unionist society.<sup>10</sup> And finally, while Noe cites letters to Virginia's governors as "a useful gauge of secessionist sentiment" in southwest Virginia, he fails to fully acknowledge their importance as evidence which blatantly suggests widespread H.O.A. membership in the region.<sup>11</sup>

### Southern Claims Commission Testimony

From 1871 to 1881 the Southern Claims Commission processed claims from 22,000 Southern Unionists seeking retribution for losses they incurred during the Civil War and heard the testimony of over 220,000 witnesses.<sup>12</sup> Of the 3,371 claims filed with

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 319-322.

<sup>9</sup>For Radical Republican F.A. Winston being elected as Floyd County's sheriff immediately after the war and also being elected as Floyd County's delegate to Virginia's 1867 constitutional convention, see Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-70* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 128; Lowe, "Virginia's Reconstruction Convention: General Schofield Rates the Delegates," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 80 (July 1972): 355; and Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 233, Claim Number 14406, testimony of F.A. Winston for Samuel Morrice.

<sup>10</sup>Noe's assertion that the Heroes of America are mentioned by only one claimant in the 220 post war claims from southwestern Virginia filed with the Southern Claims Commission is entirely incorrect. In Floyd County alone the H.O.A. is mentioned in five separate claims by seven different residents who refer to membership in the order and implicate approximately 30 other Floyd residents as H.O.A. members during the war. For Noe's inaccurate accusation, see his "Red String Scare," 321-22. For Floyd claimants mentioning the H.O.A., see Records of the Southern Claims Commission, Record Group 217, Claim Number 2993, and Record Group 233, Claim Numbers 2091, 3491, 8740, 13909.

<sup>11</sup>Noe, "Red String Scare," 312 (footnote number 20).

<sup>12</sup>For information on the number of claims as well as the claims process, see Frank W. Klingberg, *The Southern Claims Commission: A Study in Unionism* (Berkeley: University of California

the commission by Virginians, 220 were made by southwest Virginians and 47 were filed by Floyd County residents. Only twelve Floyd County claims were approved, leaving 74 percent of the county's claims disallowed or barred from consideration for procedural violations. Despite the rejection of most claims filed by Floyd residents, and the potential for flaws in such testimony, several circumstances justify an argument supporting the reliability of the county's claimants.

The claims commission's judges considered voluntary residence in the Confederacy as *prima facie* evidence of disloyalty to the United States. To counter this evidence of "disloyalty," claimants were compelled to prove their wartime loyalty to the United States beyond a reasonable doubt. The overwhelming majority of claims, no matter how genuine, were dismissed for a variety of single factors, including: a vote for secession, holding civil or military office under the Confederacy, furnishing support or supplies to the Confederate military or to persons entering it, or giving information to Confederate authorities. Floyd County residents who were coerced or intimidated into voting for secession, but supported the Union throughout the remainder of the war, were rejected by the claims commission as "disloyal." Unionist residents of the county who supplied any type of clothing or food to sons who were conscripted into the Confederate army were rejected by the commission, and even local H.O.A. members who were forced into the Confederate military were categorically denied approval.

Since a monetary reward served as the end result of a successful claim, embellishment, exaggeration, and deceit by claimants and their witnesses was entirely possible. In addition, even genuine claims were filed nearly ten years after alleged Unionist activity, creating the potential for inaccurate testimony. These factors could justifiably raise suspicions regarding the veracity of claim testimony from Floyd County residents. However, two additional factors indicate sincerity in the majority of claims from Floyd. First of all, every claim filed by a Floyd residents was under \$500, and the vast majority were for approximately \$100, making their reward for potential prosecution under perjury law very low. Even more importantly, former county magistrate and H.O.A. member Ferdinand A. Winston served as Special Commissioner of Claims for the Floyd County region.<sup>13</sup> Winston never filed a claim for himself, received only ten cents for each claim he processed, and personally testified in favor of the majority of Floyd County's claimants. Winston's affirmative certification, while not absolute proof, reasonably indicates the veracity of claims testimony from most Floyd residents.

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Press, 1955; reprint, Milwood, N.Y.: Kraus Reprint, 1974), vii-viii, 57-72, 90-116.

<sup>13</sup>Winston's position as Special Commissioner to the Southern Claims Commission is noted on all claims filed from the county with the commission. See approved and disapproved claims from Floyd residents in *ibid.*, Record Group 217 and Record Group 233.

## Epilogue: Reconstruction of Floyd County

The Civil War economically devastated the majority of Floyd County's residents, freed the slaves of its slaveowners, and altered the political allegiances of its inhabitants. Healing the deep scars of community division created during the war would take decades of work. In the meantime residents were compelled to adjust to free black members of the community, recuperate from the ravages of war, and comprehend and participate in Virginia's Reconstruction.



Former Confederate Soldier and His Wife Pose in Front of Floyd County's Confederate Monument and Original Courthouse in the Late Nineteenth Century. *Floyd County Historical Society Papers, Special Collections, V.P.I. and S.U.*

Many of the county's 475 former slaves continued to live in Floyd after gaining their freedom. By 1867 they were participating in local politics for the first time, and by 1870 the county's African American population reached 997 residents.<sup>14</sup> Floyd's white population, which increased by nearly 2000 residents every decade beginning in 1840, slowed to an increase of only 1082 residents from 1860 to 1870.<sup>15</sup> Civil War devastated much of Floyd's agricultural economy, and despite the overall rise in population,

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<sup>14</sup>[United States, Bureau of the Census] *9th Census, 1870: Statistics of Population* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 68-69.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

agriculture harvests receded from growth levels established ten years earlier. Tobacco harvests, which increased over 2000 percent from 1850 to 1860, declined 58 percent from 1860 to 1870. Corn crops declined 8 percent. Cereal production showed only a moderate overall gain, and only potato harvests increased substantially.<sup>16</sup> Real estate values in Floyd also plunged, dropping nearly 25 percent from levels established in 1860. In addition the combined value of residents' personal estates, despite the additional estates of hundreds of new residents, dropped from slightly over \$1,000,000 in 1860 to \$342,000 in 1870.<sup>17</sup>

Floyd's voters broke their pre-Civil War Democratic political tradition during Reconstruction and elected "Radical" Republican candidate Ferdinand A. Winston to Virginia's 1867 constitutional convention.<sup>18</sup> Most other southwest Virginia counties elected Conservative delegates to the convention, and only 13 out of 50 white majority counties in Virginia elected Republicans as their representatives.<sup>19</sup> Sixty-eight of the possible 104 seats at the constitutional convention were taken by Republican delegates, but only 21 of the Republicans elected were native Virginians and white, like Winston.<sup>20</sup> As a delegate, Winston won high praise from Major-General John M. Schofield, the Federal general in command of Virginia. Schofield lauded Floyd County's representative as: "Member of a loyal secret society during the war. Excellent character. Radical Republican."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>[United States, Bureau of the Census] *9th Census, 1870: Statistics of Wealth and Industry* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), 266-69.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>18</sup>Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia*, 128.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>21</sup>Lowe, "Virginia's Reconstruction Convention," 355.