

Our Haven In The Hills

By: Rick Poling

Our haven in the hills is a comfortable place to be, particularly with so much turmoil and revolution currently erupting across the globe. We can peer out and observe as much or as little as we choose, content that the internet and the myriad of television news channels available to us will keep us just as well-informed as anyone in the major cities or capitols of the world, but even more content that those same sources can be switched off and silenced when we've had our fill.

Harry Truman once said, "The only thing 'new' is the history you don't know," and sometimes, it definitely seems as though there are "new" revolutions and eruptions occurring when they are in fact a repeat or a continuance of events the world has seen over multiple centuries. Thinking of all of this lately brought back to mind how our own "Haven In The Hills," West Virginia, came into being through our own revolt against Virginia nearly 150 years ago, and how that revolt came on the heels of yet another revolt less than 100 years prior against Great Britain . . . in less than a quarter-century, our tranquil region has itself been a part of two major revolutionary events that would be headline news on CNN and the internet today!

The first, The Revolutionary War, is of course a well-known and bloody conflict; the second, our secession from Virginia and becoming a State, is less well-known but merits added celebration and admiration not only because it was bloodless, but also because it was elegantly accomplished through intelligent and strategic action.

After the successful completion of the Revolutionary War and the creation of the United States of America, the mountain regions of Virginia and the regions west of the mountains became increasingly upset with Virginia's government and its focused allocation of funds and other resources to its eastern counties. There were constant squabbles over the location of roads, bridges, railways, and many other developments that could lead to increased commerce and economic growth, and the already bad east/west relations were further strained by the west's ignored objections to the east's inclusion of slaves in its calculation of population density, which in turn led to the east's greater numbers of representatives in the legislature.

With mounting frustration, the western regions protested that there was a gross imbalance in taxation versus distribution of wealth as well as a grave under-representation and lack of voice in their government (which, interestingly enough, had been the dominant causes of The Revolutionary War, and which have continued through the centuries right into modern times to be the dominant causes of revolution, just as Harry Truman would have accurately predicted from simply observing history). So, when the legislature of Virginia voted to secede from the United States in 1861, the western regions of Virginia quickly seized their opportunity to attempt their own secession from Virginia and form their own government and State. In the confusion of the Civil War, they hoped it would hardly be noticed, let alone contested.

The first obstacle faced by the western regions of Virginia was the United States Constitution's prohibition against the division of any State without the consent of its own legislature. Clearly, the Virginia legislature in Richmond would not consent to any division of the State, which had been proposed and summarily denied multiple times. Also, any attempt to forcibly obtain consent to such division likewise seemed doomed to failure, as Virginia's militia strength was essentially totally organized and based in its eastern regions; western lives and resources would be sacrificed and no doubt lost in vain. So, the leaders of the western regions wisely chose a decisive and bold course of action: they organized their own legislative body in Wheeling and proclaimed it to be the proper and restored legislature of Virginia, and as such, in full accordance with the provisions of the United States Constitution, they voted to divide the State and create a new State to be known as West Virginia (many other names were considered, such as "Kanawha," but "West Virginia" ultimately prevailed).

Next, a Constitution for the new State was created and ratified, and, because the State of Virginia had previously seceded from the United States, the new State then faced the obstacle of petitioning the United States government for admission. The primary tasks then became convincing Congress and President Lincoln to first formally recognize the legislative body in Wheeling as "the" official legislature of Virginia with the legal authority to consent to the division of the State, and then secondly to find the admission of West Virginia into the United States of America to be "expedient," as also required by the federal Constitution. After much debate and wrangling, Congress approved the admission of West Virginia to the United States on December 10, 1862, and the legislation was then sent to President Lincoln for his consideration and approval.

Embroidered in the throes of the Civil War and with a cabinet evenly divided three to three on the issue, Lincoln delayed his decision for three weeks. On New Year's Day, Wood County Delegate J. B. Blair could stand the suspense no longer, and surprised the Chief Executive by climbing through Lincoln's bedroom window to urge the President to sign the legislation into law – whereupon a reportedly stunned but gracious Lincoln showed Blair the legislation with his signature of approval already in place. West Virginia had been born . . . and on June 20, 1863, its revolution reached completion.

So, today, as we peer out into the world's turmoils from the comfort of our Haven In The Hills, we do so with gratitude for the sacrifices, efforts and wisdom that made our own revolutions a success . . . and we hope and pray that all others now in conflict will soon be similarly blessed with havens of their own.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH: "The only thing 'new' is the history you don't know." Harry Truman