

DIVIDED LOYALTIES: SOME INCIDENTS OF THE CIVIL WAR IN KENTUCKY

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No state faced war between the North and South with more uncertainty than Kentucky. Slavery and culture bound the state to the South; family ties and trade held it to both sections. In the summer of 1861, Kentucky, not wanting to choose between the North and South, desperately tried to remain neutral. But neutrality soon proved impossible; Northern and Southern armies invaded the state in the fall. Kentuckians were forced to take a stand and most of them, devoted so long to the Unionist politics of men like Henry Clay and John J. Crittenden, chose the North or rather the old Union of Washington and Jefferson.

Still, there was considerable division of sentiment in this border state. Counties, towns and even families were torn apart by conflicting loyalties. The breakup of families over the question of Union or secession was one of the most tragic aspects of the war in Kentucky.

Senator John J. Crittenden, probably Kentucky's most outstanding Unionist, had sons in both armies. Thomas L. was a Federal general and Eugene a colonel. But their older brother George B. was a Confederate general.¹

The Breckinridge family, prominent in Kentucky affairs throughout the first part of the nineteenth century, was bitterly split. John C. Breckinridge, a former congressman, vice-president and one of Kentucky's senators when the war began, was a rebel as were his three sons. Breckinridge became a general in 1861 and Confederate secretary of war in 1865.

But John Breckinridge's uncle Robert, a fire and brimstone Presbyterian minister, was an uncompromising Union man. One of Robert Breckinridge's sons was a Federal officer and another was a West Point cadet. Two others were Confederate officers. His son-in-law also was a rebel.²

Interestingly, William C. P. Breckinridge, colonel of the Ninth Kentucky Cavalry, C.S. A., captured his Yankee brother Joseph during the battle of Atlanta in July 1864. According to Confederate General Joseph Wheeler, the Breckinridge brothers "passed the night following that sanguinary battle with as much warmth of fraternal affection as though visiting each other from neighboring armies engaged in the same cause."³

Henry Clay's oldest son Thomas was a staunch Unionist but a younger son, James B. was one of General Breckinridge's staff officers. Four of Clay's grandsons were Confederate officers and three were Federal officers.⁴ His cousin, the fiery abolitionist Cassius Marcellus Clay, was a Yankee general and President Lincoln's minister to Russia. The rift between Cassius and James B. was especially personal. Back in 1845, James B. had led a Lexington mob which closed down Cassius' antislavery newspaper.⁵

A brother, three-half brothers and the husbands of three half-sisters of

Mary Todd Lincoln were in the Confederate army; another brother was in the Federal army.⁶ Her Confederate brother Alexander was killed in the battle of Baton Rouge in August 1862. Just over a year later, General Ben Hardin Helm, husband of her half-sister Emily, fell at the battle of Chickamauga leading the Kentucky Confederate "Orphan Brigade" against a brigade composed largely of Unionist Kentuckians. President Lincoln was particularly fond of Ben Hardin; in 1861, he offered him a commission in the Federal army. Mrs. Lincoln had so hoped he would accept it because she wanted Emily to live in the White House with her. When President Lincoln heard of General Helm's death, he was overcome with grief. Supreme Court Justice David Davis recalled, "I never saw Mr. Lincoln more moved when he heard of the death of his young brother-in-law. I called to see him about 4 o'clock on the 22nd of September; I found him in the greatest grief. 'Davis,' he said, 'I feel as David of old when he was told of the death of Absalom.' I saw how grief stricken he was," Davis concluded, "so I closed the door and left him."⁷

General D. Prentice, the sharp-penned editor of the *Louisville Journal* never wavered in his support of the Union but his wife was a outspoken secessionist.⁸ Their two sons Courtland and Clarence joined the Confederate army. Courtland was killed in the battle of Augusta, Kentucky, in September 1862.⁹

Confederate General Adam R. Johnson of Henderson had two brothers in the Yankee army and a mother devoted to the Union cause. But when he visited his family in early 1862, they were glad to see him. He found his mother with a "loving heart no difference of political sentiment could estrange." Johnson's brothers got leave from their regiment to come visit him. "We walked and slept and talked freely together," the general remembered; "there being no concealment on my part as to my military connections, and there ensued a brotherly understanding that we would do all we could to protect each other in the war."¹⁰

Another rebel general, William Preston of Louisville, had distinguished Yankee in-laws. His father-in-law Robert Wickliffe edited the staunchly pro-Union *Lexington Observer and Reporter*.¹¹ In addition, Preston's son-in-law John Mason Brown was colonel of the Forty-fifth Kentucky Federal Infantry.¹²

John Hunt Morgan and his brothers-in-law Basil Duke and A. P. Hill were Confederate generals of considerable reputation. But another Morgan brother-in-law, Sanders D. Bruce, commanded the Twentieth Kentucky Federal Infantry.¹³

The Wickliffe and Pirtle families also had fathers opposing sons. Charles A. Wickliffe of Bardstown was a Unionist congressman but his son John was lieutenant-colonel of the Ninth Kentucky Infantry Regiment of the "Orphan Brigade."¹⁴ John R. Pirtle, one of Louisville's most prominent doctors, lent his surgical talents to the Federal army. His son too was an officer in the "Orphan Brigade."¹⁵

These and countless other Kentucky families were tragically divided in 1861-65. But when the war ended, most of them were reunited in the common effort to put the state back together. Sadly, however, the strain of war proved too much for others like the Moss family.

Hughie Moss fled from Union sympathizing Wayne County after killing two

Union soldiers. All of his family except his son Jack came with him to pro-Southern Graves County. Two Moss brothers joined the Confederate army while Jack enlisted with the Yankees. So bitter was the feeling against Jack that he did not even try to see his family after the war.¹⁶

In addition to families, nearly everything else in Kentucky was divided by the Civil War. The press is a prime example. Several Kentucky cities had rival Unionist and secessionist newspapers.

In Louisville, the *Journal* and *Democrat* trumpeted loudly for the Union while the *Courier* kept the Southern cause before the people. In a move indicative of a reunited postwar Kentucky, the three papers merged into the *Courier-Journal* in 1868.

At Frankfort, the state capital, the *Yeoman* championed the South while the *Commonwealth* stood squarely for the Union. In Lexington, the *Observer and Reporter* was thoroughly Unionist and the *Statesman* was devoted to the Confederacy. Maysville, Bowling Green and Henderson were other cities with both Union and Confederate newspapers.

Kentucky churches also split over the issue of Union or secession. The Presbyterians were especially at odds. Robert Breckinridge led the Unionist faction of the church and Stuart Robinson headed the secessionist element. Federal authorities arrested Robinson in the fall of 1862 and suspended for a time his publication, *The True Presbyterian*. This same journal was suppressed again in November 1864 and Robinson fled to Canada to avoid another arrest.¹⁷

The coming of the Civil War also divided the state government. Beriah Magoffin, Kentucky's governor when the war began, was a Southern sympathizer as was his secretary of state Thomas Ben Monroe, Jr.¹⁸ State Treasurer James H. Garrard was a Unionist.

The special session of the General Assembly which met in January 1861 to decide Kentucky's actions quickly split into Unionist and secessionist factions. Although the Unionists were in the majority in both houses, eleven counties had Unionist senators and secessionist representatives or vice-versa.¹⁹ Senators Walter Whitaker and Lovell H. Rousseau became Federal generals while Representative George B. Hodge was a Confederate general.²⁰

Kentucky's congressional delegation in 1861 numbered six Unionists and four secessionists. Congressman Laban T. Moore helped recruit the Fourteenth Kentucky Federal Infantry and Congressman Henry C. Burnett raised the Eighth Kentucky Confederate Infantry.²¹ Burnett and Congressman William E. Simms later served as Kentucky's two senators in the Confederate congress.²²

Probably the best gauge of the relative strength of Union and Confederate sentiment in Kentucky is the number of men furnished to the armies. According to a statement of the Kentucky adjutant-general published in the Frankfort *Yeoman* just after the war, the state provided 89,413 men to the Federal army. Also, 13,526 served as Kentucky state troops.²³ Confederate totals are less exact, but based on an adjutant-general's report made in 1911, a fair estimate would be about 30,000²⁴ Among the Kentuckians in blue were sixty-seven

generals; thirty-eight Kentucky Confederates were generals.²⁵

Thus, the Civil War in border state Kentucky was especially tragic. In the North and in the South, families and friends marched off together to fight an enemy they had never seen. But in Kentucky it was different; the enemy across the battlefield was sometimes a friend or neighbor or even a father or brother.

1. Joseph Wheeler, "Bragg's Invasion of Kentucky," **Battles and Leaders of the Civil War** (New York, 1887), Vol. III, p. 13.
2. Thomas D. Clark, **Kentucky: Land of Contrast** (New York, 1968), p. 142.
3. Wheeler, "Bragg's Invasion," p. 13.
4. *Ibid*; Robert Peter, William Henry Perrin, ed., **History of Fayette County, Kentucky** (Chicago, 1882), p. 831.
5. Clement Eaton, **Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics** (Boston, 1957), pp. 133-34.
6. Clark, **Kentucky**, p. 142.
7. Glenn Tucker, **Chickamauga: Bloody Battle in the West** (Indianapolis, 1961), pp. 239-42.
8. Robert Emmett McDowell, **City of Conflict: Louisville in the Civil War 1861-1865** (Louisville, 1962), p. 5.
9. George Dallas Mosgrove, **Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie** (Louisville, 1895), pp. 118-20.
10. Adam R. Johnson, William J. Davis, ed., **The Partisan Rangers of the Confederate States Army** (Louisville, 1904), p. 48.
11. Ed Porter Thompson, **History of the Orphan Brigade** (Louisville, 1897), p. 364; Thomas D. Clark, **A History of Kentucky** (Lexington, 1960), pp. 242-43.
12. E. Polk Johnson, **A History of Kentucky and Kentuckians** (Chicago, 1912), Vol. I, p. 319.
13. G. Lee McClain, **Military History of Kentucky** (Frankfort, 1939), p. 166; William E. Connelly and E. Merton Coulter, Charles Kerr, ed., **History of Kentucky** (Chicago, 1922), Vol. II, p. 1127.
14. Thompson, **Orphan Brigade**, p. 447; **Louisville Daily Journal**, August 9, 1861.
15. Thompson, **Orphan Brigade**, pp. 505-6; J. Stoddard Johnston, **Memorial History of Louisville from its First Settlement to the Year 1896** (New York, 1896), Vol. I, pp. 171, 185, 212-13.
16. Ruth R. Williamson, "Dr. Mickle Home Only Original Home Left Standing at Feliciana," **Mayfield Messenger, Jackson Purchase Sesquicentennial Edition**, December 27, 1969, Section J., p. 4.
17. Lewis and Richard Collins, **History of Kentucky** (Covington, 1882), Vol. I, pp. 105, 149; E. Merton Coulter, **The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky** (Chapel Hill, 1926), pp. 152, 396-99.
18. Monroe left the cabinet in the fall of 1861 (at the same time, he also resigned as editor of the **Lexington Statesman**), went South and joined the Fourth Kentucky Infantry, C.S.A. Promoted to major, he was killed in the battle of Shiloh on April 7, 1861. See Thompson, **Orphan Brigade**, pp. 459-64.
19. **Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky**, Session of January 17, 1861, pp. 45-49, 64-71, 440-42; **Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Kentucky**, Session of January 17, 1861, pp. 64-67, 77-79, 156, 185-92, 434-35.
20. Connelly and Coulter, **Kentucky**, Vol. II, pp. 1116-7; Ezra J. Warner, **Generals in Gray** (Baton Rouge, 1959), pp. 138-39.
21. Thomas Speed, **The Union Cause in Kentucky** (New York, 1907), p. 79; Berry F. Craig, "Henry C. Burnett and the Secession Movement in Kentucky," **The Journal of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society** IV (June 1976), p. 48.
22. Thompson, **Orphan Bridge**, p. 40.
23. Frankfort **Tri-Weekly Yeoman**, July 7, 1867. According to the adjutant-general, 63,975 were white troops and 25,438 were black soldiers.
24. J. Tandy Ellis, **Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kentucky Confederate Volunteers War 1861-1865** (Frankfort, 1911), 2 Vols.
25. Clark, **Land of Contrast**, p. 142.