



It Happened Near Me: To Secede or Not to Secede?

County: Loudoun

Date: 1861

Background: John Janney was one of Loudoun's most respected men and had almost been chosen as the Vice Presidential running mate with President John Tyler in 1840. Janney was one of two Loudouners elected to Virginia's Secession Convention, to meet beginning February 13, 1861 to decide whether or not Virginia should leave the Union. Janney was chosen as Chairman of the Convention, and there are official records of what was said by every delegate. In his letters home to his wife Alice he discusses the coming of secession with growing unease.

"February 13, 1861. This is the most important convention that has been assembled in this State since the year 1776 . . . Gentlemen, there is a flag which for nearly a century has been borne in triumph through the battle and the breeze, and which now floats over this capitol, and on which there is a star representing this ancient Commonwealth, and my earnest prayer, in which I know every member of this body will cordially unite, is that it may remain there forever, provided always that its luster is untarnished . . ."

(Letter to Alice) "April 13, 1861. [I write from my Richmond hotel] while the cannon are roaring around me fired (to the eternal infamy of those concerned in it) on account of the surrender of Fort Sumter and the disgrace of the flag of our country. . . Abe Lincoln ought to be tarred, feathered and burnt for not withdrawing the [Fort Sumter] garrison . . . We know not what a day will bring forth."

(Letter to Alice) "April 15, 1861. [I believe President Lincoln's Declaration of the Confederate States as being "in rebellion" and his call for troops today will undo the Union majority in Virginia's Secession Convention . . .] I have always believed that national sins are punished in this world and we have committed some of so deep a dye ... I fear there is not escape for us."

"April 17, 1861. Our decision here is pregnant with the issue of human freedom all over the globe. I believe that if the United States fails there is no hope left for representative government and liberty regulated by law. I believe that the dark night of universal despotism will settle down over the whole globe, upon the failure of this great experiment of ours. . . Sir, I know what is before me . . . an Ordinance of Secession is war, a cruel, bloody, civil war."

"April 23, 1861. [General Lee,] yesterday your mother Virginia placed her sword in your hand upon the implied condition that . . . you will draw it only in her defense, and that you will fall with it in your hand rather than the object for which it was placed there shall fall."



John and Alice Janney's home still stands on Cornwall Street in Leesburg. They lived there with two or three enslaved workers. This photo of John Janney taken before the Civil War.

Making Sense of Evidence from the Past.

1. From the tone of his remarks on February 13th, was Janney a Unionist or a Secessionist? What does Janney mean when he says “provided that its luster is untarnished . . .” ?
2. On April 13th, the news arrived in Richmond of the fall of Fort Sumter at Charleston, South Carolina. Janney writes of “cannon roaring around me.” Who is doing the cannon-firing and celebrating? What do these people want?
4. On April 15th, Janney speaks of “national sins.” What is he referring to most likely?
5. On April 17th, Janney speaks of “this great experiment of ours”—and claims that if it fails, it will bring the “dark night of universal despotism” on the world. What is this “great experiment” and what would its failure signal to the rest of the world?
7. As President of the Virginia Secession Convention John Janney gives the sword of command of Virginia's soldiers to General Robert E. Lee. Does this mean John Janney changed his mind about secession? Why or why not?