

History behind the Free State of Winston

When Alabama was being settled in the early 1800's, our first settlers were diverse in their origins. Our river regions were the most desirable lands. Indeed this is where the Indians lived.

They realized the importance of water and the abundant fishing for their sustenance besides the natural advantage offered by these waters. The river basins also offered the most fertile soil for cultivation.

Among these river basins is a swath of land across the middle of the state that extends from Georgia to Mississippi. This area is known as the Black Belt. This region of our state is called the Black Belt because of the rich, black, luminous soil found there. This rich black soil is perfect for growing cotton. The people who settled the Black Belt were looking for new cotton lands. They had burned up their soil in the east coast of Virginia by planting the cash crop cotton continuously year after year. The soil they found in the Black Belt was much better than their worn out soil in the tidelands. Therefore, the people who settled in the Black Belt were primarily planters from Virginia and Georgia.

These settlers were well educated and many had been leaders in their governments in those states. They were well heeled slave owners and became the cotton growing plantation owners of the Black Belt. They also usurped and wielded inordinate power in state political affairs for the next century,



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despite the fact that they were a distinct minority population wise.

In contrast, the people who settled North Alabama were small farmers who migrated to the Tennessee Valley of North Alabama from North Carolina or simply moved down from the hill country of Tennessee. The land they settled on was not conducive to growing cotton. It was hilly and less fertile. These folks were not interested in being cotton farmers anyway. They were yeomen hill farmers who were happy to have 40 acres and a mule. They were fiercely independent and very religious. They did not need slaves like their neighbors to the south. Therefore, when the winds of division between the North and South began to blow in the 1850s an obvious political difference between North and South Alabama arose.

With the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, along with the Emancipation Proclamation abolishing slavery, the crucible decision of secession arose. Contrary to what most present day Alabamians think, it was not an easy unified decision that we should leave the Union. The obvious political cleavage between North and South Alabama was stark and measured. The folks in North Alabama did not own slaves and they figured they did not have a dog in that fight.

A secession convention was held on Jan. 7, 1861, in Montgomery. The vote was extremely close. There were 100 delegates. The vote was 54 to secede and 46 against secession. The vote fell along regional lines. The Black Belters from South Alabama were for creating a confederacy of southern states to

protect their slave ownership and way of life. The hill farmers from North Alabama preferred to wait and see what their cousins from Tennessee were going to do because they had more in common with them. These North Alabamians voted against secession from the Union at this time.

It was shortly after the secession convention that the majority of the good citizens of the northwest Alabama county of Winston met at Looney's Tavern to determine their course of action regarding the advent of the war between the North and the South. These yeomen farmers of the hills were obviously reluctant to leave the Union for the cause of the planter and his slaves. In 1860 there were only 14 slave owners in Winston County.

The legend of Winston County is that on July 4, 1861, at their meeting at Looney's Tavern, the good people of Winston County decided to secede from Alabama and remain in the Union. Thus, they basically ignored the Civil War the best they could. In their minds they never left the Union and remained free, and independent from Alabama and the War Between the States. That is why they are known in Alabama political history and folklore as the "Free State of Winston."

See you next week.

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