



## LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

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### Union or Secession Exhibition Opens at the Library of Virginia on December 6, 2010

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For Immediate Release

(Richmond, Virginia) – The Library of Virginia will present ***Union or Secession: Virginians Decide***, running December 6, 2010–October 1, 2011. The exhibition explores what Virginians were thinking and saying as states in the Deep South withdrew from the United States following the election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860. The exhibition and accompanying Web site may surprise you. All eyes were on Virginia during the winter of 1860–1861, and both federal and Confederate leaders understood Virginia’s pivotal role in shaping opinion on union or secession. Deep South states sent commissioners to convince Virginians that their fates were tied to the slaveholding South; federal officials courted Virginia leaders in hopes of brokering a compromise. It is fair to say that Virginia’s decision fundamentally shaped the course of all subsequent events.

***Union or Secession: Virginians Decide*** describes and analyzes the complexity of the crisis as it unfolded between the 1860 presidential campaign and the first battle of Manassas in July 1861, with a particular emphasis on the secession convention and debates. By using the words of Virginians in their diaries, correspondence, newspapers, speeches, and other records, the exhibition lets Virginians from all walks of life speak for themselves as they lived through the crisis and sometimes changed their minds as the winter and spring of 1861 progressed.

Why was Virginia’s decision so critical to America’s fate in 1860 and key to the ultimate course and outcome of the sectional crisis? Virginia was central to American identity for its role in the founding of the United States and its political principles—both sides wanted to claim Virginia’s historical legacy. Virginia was the largest slaveholding state in America and second only to Maryland as home to the largest free black population in the South; the fate of slavery in the nation hinged on Virginia’s decision. Virginia was the most industrialized state south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and thus critical to the Confederacy. Virginia was strategically connected through commercial and cultural ties to northern, western, and southern regions, as well as internationally to the Atlantic trade networks.

Known in the history books as the Secession Convention, the convention that met in Richmond from February 14 through May 1, 1861, was, for its first two months, a Union convention. A vote on April 4, 1861, was 88 to 45 against an ordinance of secession. A second vote after Lincoln’s call for troops was 88 to 55 for submitting an ordinance of secession to the voters for ratification or rejection on May 23, 1861. Although many Virginians supported secession in 1860, most did not

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## **Union or Secession/Page Two**

approve until April 1861, and even after that, others remained loyal to the Union, some left Virginia, and some tried to remain apolitical. ***Union or Secession*** traces the beliefs and words of ordinary Virginians as well as of state convention delegates through the dramatic change that occurred in the aftermath of the surrender of Fort Sumter and Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers to put down the rebellion. The exhibition will show that Virginians' choice on the question of secession was far from certain as dramatic moves were being made outside the state.

For educators, researchers, and those unable to visit the Library of Virginia the ***Union or Secession*** web site (<http://www.virginiamemory.com/exhibitions/>) offers a unique opportunity to understand the questions that Virginians asked themselves and the answers that profoundly changed the American republic. The Web site incorporates not only the documents from the exhibition but also newspaper articles and editorials and parts of the convention speeches. Biographies of some of the convention delegates will explore how and why people's opinions changed during the crisis.

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## **About the Library of Virginia**

The Library of Virginia ([www.lva.virginia.gov](http://www.lva.virginia.gov)), located in historic downtown Richmond, holds the world's most extensive collection of material about the Old Dominion and has been a steward of the commonwealth's documentary and printed heritage since 1823. The story of Virginia and Virginians has been told in many ways since 1607. At the Library of Virginia it is told through more than 110 million manuscripts and more than 1.9 million books, serials, bound periodicals, microfilm reels, newspapers and state and federal documents, each an individual tile in the vast and colorful mosaic of Virginia's experience.