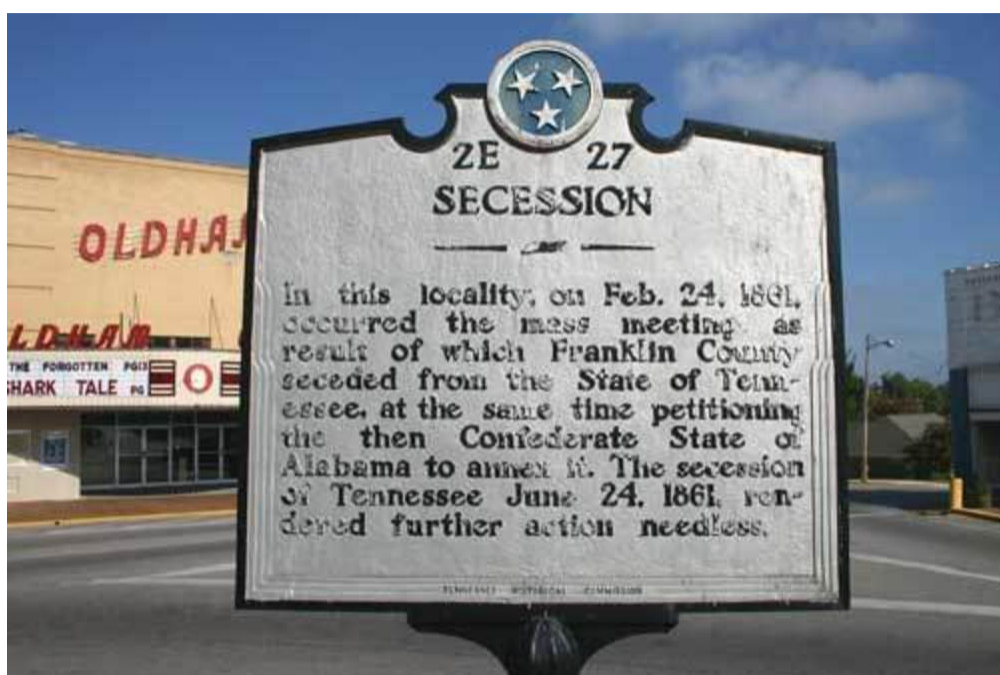




## ORIGINS OF A SECESSIONIST COUNTY

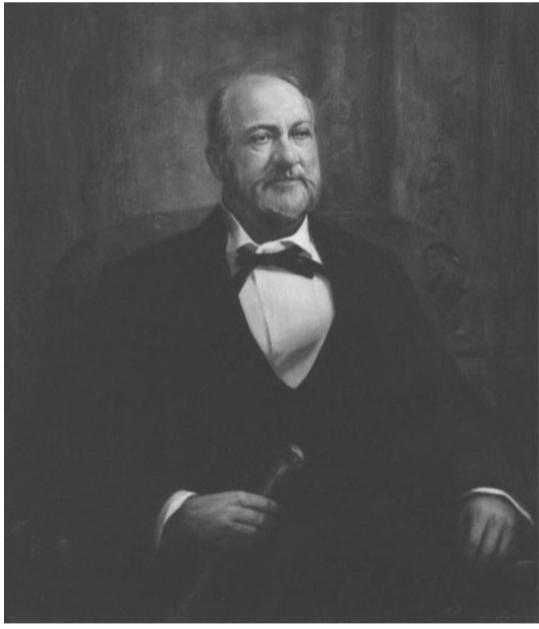
By Tim Mulligan, July 3, 2020

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Historical secession sign for Franklin County | [source](#)

In the aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's election, Tennessee authorities held a referendum on February 9, 1861, to determine whether the state ought to convene a secession convention, and join with the seven other southern states that had departed the Union. The proposal was defeated, with 69,675 opposed to the idea of a convention against 57,798 in favor. The vote varied widely from county to county, but the most extreme result belonged to Franklin County in southern Middle Tennessee. There those supporting a secession convention outnumbered their opponents 1,240 to 206, or more than six to one. After the referendum's defeat, Franklin County leaders petitioned the state of Alabama for annexation, and began organizing military units that would form the core of the 1st Tennessee Infantry Regiment (Provisional Army, C.S.A.), a unit that was already drilling in Virginia before Tennessee left the Union.



Peter Turney | Tennessee State Library and Archives

What made Franklin County so wildly pro-secession, in relation to the rest of Tennessee? The central issue of slavery does not provide an obvious explanation. The 3,551 enslaved African-Americans did represent almost 26% of the county's population, although the numbers represented both an absolute and relative decline from the 1850 census data. Yet in neighboring and wealthier Bedford County, where over 31% of the population represented enslaved African-Americans, voters rejected the proposed secession convention by a two-to-one margin. The strongest political figure in Franklin County was attorney Peter Turney, whose father, Hopkins Lacy Turney, had fought for southern interests in the U.S. Congress from 1837 to 1851. His son Peter led an effort in 1857 to expel Franklin County's free black population, and during the November 1860 presidential election he warned an audience in the county seat of Winchester as to Abraham Lincoln's ultimate goal: ". . . to promote the negro to your level, or rather to degrade you to the negro's."

Economic developments also bound Franklin County more closely to the South. The Winchester and Alabama Railroad, chartered in 1850, linked the county and its western neighbor Lincoln County to the main Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad at the small town of Decherd. Though never completed, by August 1859 trains from Nashville were running to Winchester and beyond, representing potential "avenues of trade and travel to Central and South Alabama (which) will be consumers of the products of Middle Tennessee," as a Franklin County newspaper enthused. Reflecting this perceived trade opportunity, local farmers focused on wheat production, resulting in a sevenfold increase in both Franklin and Lincoln Counties from 1850 to 1860.



McClurg Hall, Sewanee: The University of the South | Rex Hammock

But the real investment for Franklin County's future prosperity involved more than commercial trade. In late November 1857, the Board of Trustees for the University of the South selected Sewanee in Franklin County as the site for their new educational institution and Episcopal theological seminary, a university to rival Oxford or Harvard in its academics but dedicated to the preservation of southern cultural values. Sewanee won out over several other locations, but final approval required generous land donations by individuals and Franklin County's commitment to construct two access turnpikes to Sewanee. A \$21,000 county tax to fund the turnpike construction narrowly passed a county referendum in May 1860, a victory won largely on the promises of Turney and his allies that the new university would in time multiply local real estate values.

Lincoln's election and Tennessee's status in the Union, however, threw all this into doubt. Construction work on the university ceased, and its possible relocation discussed. This was the threat on which Peter Turney focused in his speeches supporting a secession convention in February 1861. A Unionist eyewitness later reported the influence of Turney's arguments: "Many ignorant people were made to believe that the benefits to the County arising from (the University of the South) would be worth more than the Union."

Thus Franklin County's strong secessionism reflected a variety of factors. Traditional concerns about the Republicans' hostility toward slavery blended with new regional economic opportunities brought by railroad expansion. The founding and potential loss of the University of the South, however, touched sensitive nerves: The strengthened regional identification and shared social institutions and values of the county with the Deep South, and the promise of land and tithe for a more prosperous future. When Peter Turney led the 1st Tennessee out of Winchester on May 1, 1861, they marched to war not only for a better tomorrow, but for claims already staked.



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