

John S. Carlile and the West Virginia Statehood Movement

by

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On May 29, 1862, Waitman Willey presented to the United States Senate a bill which, if passed, would have authorized the formation of a State of West Virginia from land within the borders of the State of Virginia. The bill was sent to the committee on territories on which Clarksburg native Senator John S. Carlile served. The bill was reported out of committee on June 13, 1862, but changed to include within the boundaries of the new state fifteen Shenandoah Valley counties and to demand that a new constitution for the new state be framed with the provision that all children born to slaves after July 4, 1863, be free. Such a bill, whose authorship was attributed to John S. Carlile, could not succeed.¹ The purpose of the bill could only be an attempt to scuttle the formation of the new state. Why had Carlile, the one who took the first steps in the statehood movement for the mountain counties, now worked against the very thing he had sparked?

Historians have agreed for years that Carlile chose the road which led to political disgrace and financial ruin because he was pro-slavery. Yet his interest in slavery as an institution was slight. The purpose of this paper is to consider the influences which may have caused Carlile to act as he did.

John Snyder Carlile was born in Winchester December 16, 1817. He was reared by his widowed mother in near penury², read law, made his way in 1840 to Beverly, where he practiced law for three years. He qualified to practice at the first meeting of the court in the new county of Barbour April 3, 1843;³ he qualified to practice in Harrison County May 17, 1843.⁴

Sometime between 1843 and 1846 while Carlile lived and practiced in Philippi, he met Mary Ellen Gittings, a Clarksburg girl. A romance developed and on March 5, 1846, Reverend Ezekiel Quillan, Presbyterian minister, presided at the marriage of the two.⁵ John S. Carlile was 29 years old; Mary Ellen Gittings was 18.

Carlile, brilliant and impulsive, married into a conservative, cultured family whose ancestors were first settlers in the area. Mary Ellen's great grandfather was George Jackson whose daughter Catherine married Dr. William Williams, Clarksburg's first physician and the most literary man in the early settlement.⁶ Mary Ellen's father Dr. Michael D. Gittings had married Mary Williams, daughter of Dr. William and Catherine Williams.⁷

John and Mary Ellen Carlile established a home in Philippi. Carlile won election to the Virginia Senate in 1847 and 1849. He was one of four men elected to represent a district made up of Randolph, Lewis, Barbour, Braxton, Wirt, and Jackson counties in the Constitutional Convention of 1850 called to revise the Virginia Constitution.⁸ A daughter Mary was born in Philippi to Mary Ellen and John Carlile February 4, 1849.⁹

John and Mary Carlile decided to move to Clarksburg. John Carlile bought a piece of land overlooking Elk Creek and the town of Clarksburg and bounded on the north by Webster Street and on the south by Thompson Street November 22, 1851.¹⁰ George Jackson's mill built in 1784 had been kept, since first sold by George Jackson to Dr. William Williams, in the female lineage of the Jackson family.¹¹ Perhaps a plan to take over the mill caused Carlile to erect on his land a brick house facing Elk Creek and sitting high on the hill above the mill. Carlile bought the mill from his father-in-law April 16, 1853, made extensive repair, and settled down managing a business and building a law practice.

The life as squire did not last long. The country was afire. Political parties were polarizing with abolitionists dominating the Whigs and secessionists dictating policy of Democrats. Many rational men chose to rise above the extremism of the parties and work to save the Union. Carlile, with his gift of oratory, held crowds whenever he spoke decrying both abolitionists and secessionists and as he said later, "was drafted" to run for the U.S. Congress on the American Party ticket. He sold the Jackson mill November 6, 1855,¹² the same month he won the Congressional seat from the Eleventh District of Virginia. On the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives he said June 21, 1856: "What I fear is power and influence of party. If the people will but throw off the harness of party, discard party prejudice, and learn to distrust their party leaders, we have nothing to fear. There is intelligence enough, patriotism enough in all parts of our country to silence agitation and hurl from high places in government wanton disturbers of the public peace."¹³

In 1857 Carlile decided not to run for reelection. The American Party had spent itself; the Republican and Democratic parties were more radical than ever:

Washington City, D.C.

Dear Sir:

Your favor inquiring whether I would be a candidate for reelection in Congress is received. I am in the daily receipt of letters making similar inquiries and therefore avail myself of the public way to answer them all. I have never, at my own instance, announced myself a candidate for any office. [He had been drafted.] ... The people of our district entertain the same great constitutional principles which have guided my action; but there is at this time a seeming difference of opinion between the majority and myself.

I believe in my heart the continued agitation of the question of slavery is fast loosening the bonds that bind us together as one people and will ultimately end in the destruction of the best interests of our section of the Union, if not in the destruction of the Union itself. The party with which I formerly acted and whose original principles I still and ever shall maintain has allowed itself to be diverted from the maintenance of the principles of democracy as inaugurated by Jefferson and has accepted the sectional issue which the fanaticism of the non-slave holding states has from an early period in our history sought to bring about.

In proof of this we have seen men of all parties welcomed into the Democratic party upon the sole condition of giving their support to the nominees of the recent convention, adopting a platform upon which the filibusters, fire-eaters, federalists, free-soilers, and disunionists alike could stand... I could not vote for the nominees of the Convention and therefore differed from the majority I represent. I have endeavored faithfully to discharge my duties. I am willing my Congressional record shall undergo the severest Democratic scrutiny.

I shall retire to private life strengthened in the correctness of my political opinions and shall do battle with American Democracy, who believe that this is our land, its blessings to be shared by all alike, and its government and destiny to be confided alone to those who are deeply imbued and fully acquainted with the genius, spirit and nature, and character of our institutions.

Very respectfully,
John S. Carlile¹⁴

Constituents urged Carlile to run again. The editor of a secessionist newspaper in Clarksburg accused him of cowardice: "We are not disposed to permit Mr. Carlile to shirk the responsibility of a canvass next spring. He must stand up to the rack!"¹⁵ Carlile ran on the Democratic ticket. He waged an ardent campaign, but as he had predicted, he lost, this time by 989 votes.

Carlile returned to Clarksburg and his law practice. He joined Union men to urge the use of constitutional remedies and the ballot box for redress of grievances before resorting to violent measures. He urged support of Mr. Lincoln as U.S. President at a meeting of Union men in Clarksburg on November 25, 1860, and after the Virginia Assembly authorized a Constitutional Convention for February 13, 1861, Carlile met with Union men on January 19, 1861, to form a platform swearing to support no delegate to the convention who was not unequivocally opposed to secession and who would not so pledge himself.¹⁶ The Unionists nominated John Carlile and Charles S. Lewis to run as candidates in the election. John Carlile and Benjamin Wilson, a secessionist, were elected to represent Harrison County at the Constitutional Convention.

Carlile's oratorical skills made him the leader of foes of secession in Richmond. The debates were heated; the press was strongly secessionist. Carlile felt that agitators from outside the State of Virginia incited the passions of the mob. He later in a speech as U.S. Senator said, "I have stood in the capitol of my own state amid the jeers and threats of a mob, and when assassins sought my life. On the 13th of April, 1861, a mob of not less than a hundred men, or devils, came to my lodgings with a rope to hang me!"¹⁷

Carlile escaped Richmond with his life and arrived in Clarksburg disgusted that the Convention had voted April 17, 1861, for Virginia to secede from the Union. He told supporters who came to his home to gather at a mass meeting in Clarksburg on the evening of April 22. Twelve hundred answered the call and drew up a resolution calling for counties to send representatives to Wheeling for a meeting on May 13. Eleven men, including Carlile, were selected to represent Harrison County.

At Wheeling Carlile, angry at the actions of the Virginia Assembly toward the mountain counties of the state and toward the Union, wanted immediately to form a new state made up of the 10th and 11th Congressional Districts plus Wayne County: "There is no difference in opinion between the advocates of a separation of this state . . . It has been an object for which I have labored at least since the year 1850. The convention which met at Richmond in that year and adopted our present State Constitution clearly disclosed to my mind the utter incompatibility consistent with the interests of the people of northwestern Virginia of remaining in connection with the eastern part of the state . . . [Forming a new state] is the only legal, constitutional remedy left this people if they do not approve the action of the Virginia Convention. It is said we are not prepared for such action. When will we be better prepared?"¹⁸ Other delegates thought Carlile impulsive; they decided to gather again in Wheeling June 11, 1861. In the interim they would study the provisions given in the U.S. Constitution whereby a new state can be formed from land within the borders of a state.

By the time Carlile took his seat in Wheeling on June 11, 1861, his views had changed: "If we could divide the state today, who would do so under existing circumstances? When we are trying not to resist this attempt at transferring us to a rebellious government, shall we be distracted with matters of secondary importance, as all must admit this question of separation to be at this hour?"¹⁹ What had happened in the month Carlile had spent in Clarksburg between the two meetings? One clue is found in words of John J. Davis who elected to the Virginia legislature, took his seat in Wheeling on June 11: "The position I occupy here [Wheeling] is not an enviable one. I am for conservative, loyal constitutional action but I am very much afraid the majority of those in the convention are revolutionists. I would not have come here at all but for the earnest solicitations of the Union men in my county. If measures are adopted I cannot approve, I will withdraw from the convention and go home and resign as a delegate-elect to the Virginia legislature. I am opposed to the plan proposed [provisional government]. Its strongest supports are Black Republicans. My county is strongly Union but I am not mistaken when I say it is not even tainted with Republicanism."²⁰

Carlile disliked abolitionists as much as he disliked secessionists. When he saw radicalism developing at Wheeling, he acted consistent with his stand in 1855 when he left the Democratic party to run on the ticket of the American Party. He wanted nothing to do with extremism. He impulsively had pushed for a new state but not a state which would change the social mores of Virginia. Better to renege on his idea of statehood than to stand for something in which he did not believe.

Meanwhile he spent most of his time during the second Wheeling meeting on the machinery of the convocation such as securing funds to keep business going. Delegates formed a Restored Government of Virginia and the authorized legislature meeting in July as the Virginia Assembly chose John Carlile and Waitman Willey to be U.S. Senators. In the fall the two men were seated by the U. S. Senate as senators from the State of Virginia.

In addition to Carlile's natural conservatism, despite occasional rash acts, the stand of the family of the wife of Carlile influenced Carlile. Not one Jackson joined the Unionists. After the death of Mary Ellen Carlile's mother, Dr. Gittings had married his wife's first cousin Sophia Jackson, daughter of John George and Mary Meigs Jackson. Her brother James Madison Jackson did not vote when the referendum on the amendment to the Virginia Constitution to allow secession was taken on May 23, 1861.²¹ The action of Thomas Jonathan (Stonewall) Jackson, another kin of Carlile's wife, is well known.

In June 1861 Clarksburg was chosen to be the base of Union military operations in the Department of West Virginia with Quartermaster Charles Leib in charge of provisioning the forces. The army took over the Jackson orchard on land between East Main and East Pike streets to corral mules and horses. Soon the Union officers would arrest James Madison Jackson and take him by train to Grafton as a suspected secessionist. Soldiers stopped citizens entering or leaving the town and would not let them proceed until they had taken the oath of loyalty to the Union. Clarksburg was in a hubbub. Little wonder that Carlile had said in Wheeling, "If we could divide the state today, who would do so under existing circumstances?"

On the floor of the U. S. Senate Carlile defended Lincoln for not risking another defeat on the banks of the Potomac. His Richmond experience had caused Carlile to believe conspirators and agitators had influenced the South: "If this Union is ever to be restored, it must be through the action of loyal people in the seceded states . . . Relieve them from the terrors inaugurated by the wicked conspirators in their midst, relieve them from the presence of armed rebels and your Union will be speedily restored."²² Carlile was against tampering with social institutions: "attempt the exercise of an unconstitutional power by the liberation of their slaves

and you will strike down every loyal man in the slaveholding states and not one will be left to tell the story of the Union!"²³

The Senate debated a Confiscation Bill which if passed would allow authorities to confiscate the property, both real and personal, of all who had taken up arms against the government. Carlile argued on the floor of the Senate that such a bill was unconstitutional and would continue the war forever. If slaves were freed under the bill, Carlile said they would face either extermination or reenslavement. He quoted from President Lincoln's Inaugural Address, the proclamations by four generals, and resolutions passed by Congress that the government never intended to make war against slavery. Carlile thought that if a proclamation of amnesty were made to the citizens in the rebellious states that peace could be had in ninety days.²⁴

Carlile never wavered from the stand he took in the June 1861 Wheeling meeting: With a war being fought in the streets of the delegates' hometowns, division of the state was of secondary importance. As a member of the Committee on Territories of the U. S. House of Representatives, he was in a position to scuttle the statehood movement. He attempted to do so.

When the next months brought the passage of a bill to form West Virginia, the Emancipation Proclamation, and finally the end of the War Between the States, Carlile was out of favor. He finished his term in the U. S. Senate and went to live in Frederick, Maryland.

He attended the convention of the Democratic Party to nominate a candidate for U. S. President in New York City in 1868. He disagreed so strongly with the choice of the party that he joined the Republicans to support Ulysses Grant for President. A Clarksburg newspaper wrote of the move: "The rebel doctors of the Democracy at New York effected a cure for Senator Carlile which could not be wrought by Republican legislation and he is back among those friends he was not more reluctant in leaving than they were in losing him. And his reasons will strike a chord in thousands of conservative hearts, especially the following: 'My opposition to Radicalism is well known. That I would have saved the Union party from it if it had been in my power, is also well known. So great was my opposition to the ultraism of Congressional legislation, and so sincere my convictions that rather than abide the one or surrender the other, I gave up my place in the Senate, and for a time lost the confidence of my Union friends. I had hoped and expected that the action of the New York Convention would have entitled its nominees to the support of conservative Union men. Had its members pledged themselves to the maintenance of the right of local self-government in the states, as secured by the Constitution, and nominated as their Presidential candidate a man of undoubtful Unionism, I should have voted for its nominees. This was not done. The conservatism of Republicanism nominated Grant. The radicalism of Democracy nominated Seymour.'"²⁵

Word reached Clarksburg that John Carlile was sick and in straitened financial circumstances. Benjamin Shuttleworth, who had been a delegate to all the Wheeling conventions and a neighbor of John Carlile in Clarksburg, traveled to Frederick in 1868 and persuaded Carlile to return to Clarksburg.²⁶ Shuttleworth sold Carlile 300 acres on the West Fork River and on the Mt. Clare Road in present Custer Addition.²⁷ Carlile built a house on the land and moved to the country.

John Carlile often called at the Benjamin Shuttleworth home in Clarksburg and sometimes stayed overnight. He and Benjamin Shuttleworth talked late and one night Carlile told a tale. Carlile during the war had been west and had stopped in St. Louis, where he gave the much publicized "St. Louis Speech" criticizing the Lincoln administration. A few days after Carlile's return to Washington a crowd gathered around Carlile in the street complimenting him on his attack on the administration. Lincoln, taking his morning constitutional, came along in his carriage. He saw the situation at a glance and stopped to invite Carlile to join him for the ride. Carlile said to Benjamin Shuttleworth: "He [Lincoln] asked my advice of every important measure that came into his mind as if I were the last word of authority but not in a single instance did he refer to that damn fool speech I had made. Can't you see what a position it put me in with those who had been patting me on the back and at the same time showing that it didn't affect him any more than a fice barking. Ben, he was the keenest politician and shrewdest man in the county." The son of Benjamin Shuttleworth who wrote the account of the conversation added the comment, "This little heretofore unwritten story of Lincoln helps describe Carlile who sometimes made false steps."²⁸

Carlile's great gift was his great enemy. He was a "silver-tongued" orator. He could sway crowds with speeches delivered with a stentorian voice in a day before electronics made a conversational tone effective. When news spread that Carlile would speak, citizens came for miles to hear him. A little bit of the demagogue is in most people and to see crowds moved as one speaks is indeed heady. Except for his speeches in April and May 1861 when angry at the Virginia Convention, he urged separation of the mountain counties from Virginia, Carlile always pled the conservative side of any question. He was a foe of radicalism. He lived by Emerson's dictum: "Speak what you think today and speak what you think tomorrow even if it contradicts everything you say today." No greater example of courage than that of John Carlile is to be found in the history of West Virginia.

In 1876 Carlile's farm "Waverly" was sold in front of the courthouse.²⁹ Carlile died October 24, 1878. He is buried in the IOOF Cemetery on South Chestnut Street in Clarksburg.

Footnotes

1. James M. Callahan, Semi-Centennial History of West Virginia, p. 150.
2. The author examined records in Frederick County, VA. She found no record of deeds recorded under the name "Carlile".
3. Hu Maxwell, History of Barbour County, p. 201
4. Harrison County, VA (WV), Court, Order Book 1841-43, May 17, 1843.
5. Harrison County, VA (WV), Marriage Record 3, p. 210.
6. Henry Haymond, History of Harrison County, p. 260.
7. Alice Jo Hess, History of Medicine in Harrison County, p. 368. Penelope Williams, the older daughter of Dr. Williams, married James McCally who assisted Julia Neale Jackson at the time of the birth of Thomas Jonathan (Stonewall) Jackson. Ibid., p. 488. Thomas Jackson Arnold, Early Life and Letters of General Thomas J. Jackson, p. 25
8. Journal, Acts and Proceedings of a General Convention of the State of Virginia...1850, p. 4.
9. John S. Carlile family grave marker, IOOF Cemetery, Clarksburg, WV.
10. Harrison County, VA (WV), Deed Book 38, p. 53.
11. George Jackson sold the mill to Dr. William Williams May 17, 1815; Dr. Williams sold the mill to Dr. Michael D. Gittings September 24, 1829; Dr. Gittings sold the mill to John S. Carlile April 16, 1853. Harvey W. Harmer, Old Grist Mills of Harrison County, pp. 51-3.
12. Ibid.
13. John S. Carlile, "The Cincinnati Platform."
14. The Clarksburg Register, Clarksburg, VA, December 26, 1856.
15. Ibid., February 6, 1857.
16. Henry Haymond, History of Harrison County, p. 334.
17. The National Telegraph, Clarksburg, VA, January 3, 1862.
18. James C. McGregor, The Disruption of Virginia, pp. 196-7.
19. Ibid.
20. J. J. Davis in a letter June 13, 1861, J. J. Davis Papers.
21. Poll Books of election of May 23, 1861.
22. The National Telegraph, January 3, 1862.
23. Ibid., March 4, 1862.
24. Ibid., March 14, 1862.
25. Dorothy Davis, History of Harrison County, p. 193.
26. Frank Shuttleworth, "John S. Carlile".
27. Harrison County, VA (WV), Deed Book 53, p. 146.
28. Frank Shuttleworth, "John S. Carlile".
29. Harrison County, VA (WV), Deed Book 59, p. 146.

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