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The Bell-Everett Flag



Bell-Everett Flag
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The Bell-Everett flag is a most interesting but rather mysterious one. This is a captured battle flag but with an inscription that is political instead of military. It is a Confederate flag that was used to defend secession and disunion, but the names printed on the flag are associated with the desire for preservation of the Union. The canton includes only seven stars indicating that the flag was made very early in the war, perhaps even before the outbreak of war. Flags at that time were being made in the heat of zealous enthusiasm for the cause, yet the names of Bell and Everett had been associated only a few months before with patience and moderation. Joseph W. Rich, curator at SHSI-Iowa City in the early 1900's, speculated that "Whoever made it may have been especially sore about the 1860 election, 'Bell' and 'Everett' probably referring to candidates who had lost!" Since there is no historical record of ownership or capture of this flag, a look at the 1860 presidential election and its aftermath may help explain why a Confederate unit would display such an emblem in combat.

The presidential election of 1860 marked one of the great turning points in American history. This election represented the culmination of the controversy over

slavery with its legal roots going back to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and the colonial slave codes, its moral roots going back to the first Quaker abolitionist literature in the mid-1700's, and its economic roots going back to the arrival of the first slaves in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. Many political issues, such as states' rights, nullification, and secession stemmed either in part or in full from the slavery controversy. Political attempts at compromise over slavery ranged from the 3/5 rule (for congressional representation) in the Constitutional Convention to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The issue of slavery produced gag rules and physical brawls on the floor of Congress, splits in religious denominations that have scarred those groups to this day, explosive and oppressive reactions to slave rebellions, the destruction or reforming of old and previously stable political parties as well as the creation of new and powerful political parties, the stealing of elections, vilification without parallel of Supreme Court decisions, and virtual civil war in the territories, especially Kansas, well before 1860. By early 1860, the nation was becoming polarized by the increasingly radical rhetoric of the "Fire-Eaters" in the South and ominous talk of an "irrepressible conflict" by abolitionists in the North. Historians have long argued over the causes of the Civil War, but there can be no doubt that slavery was the root problem that drove all other issues that eventually led to this uniquely American tragedy.

Yet in spite of all this, the majority of Americans remained moderate in their views. The presidential election of 1860 turned out to be a four-sided contest, but each candidate was in some way

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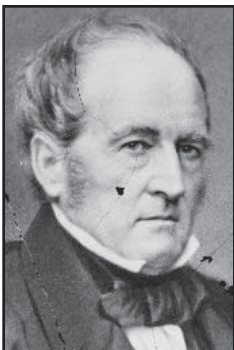
moderate in his views or disposition. The contest in the northern states was mostly between Abraham Lincoln, a Republican of essentially Free-Soil, but not abolitionist views, and Stephen Douglas, a Northern Democrat who had pondered, even agonized, for years over how the nation could solve the problems engendered by slavery in a reasonable way that would also preserve the integrity of the Union. In the southern states, the contest was between Vice President John C. Breckinridge, a Southern Democrat who, though supported strongly by the most extreme proslavery groups, was himself a man of goodwill and who was reasonable in working with leaders in Congress, and John Bell, a Tennessee slaveholder who nevertheless campaigned on a platform for maintaining the Union.

John Bell and his vice-presidential running mate on the Constitutional Union Party ticket, Edward Everett of Massachusetts, had both been well-known public men in America for decades before 1860. Bell had served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1827 to 1841, was Speaker from 1834 to 1835, secretary of war under Harrison in 1841, and a U.S. Senator from 1847 to 1859. Everett had been a professor and

president of Harvard College, served five terms in the U.S. House, was governor of Massachusetts from 1836 to 1840, U.S. Minister to Great Britain from 1841 to 1845, secretary of state under Fillmore in 1852, and U.S. Senator from 1853 to 1854.

As the election of 1860 approached, many Americans in the upper South were caught in a dilemma. Many supported the institution of slavery with or (mostly) without being slaveholders themselves. At the same time, love of the Union was a given, and the thought of secession was abhorrent. Many northern conservatives sympathized with this group. One common thread that ran through both of these groups was that they had been mostly members of the old Whig Party before its demise in 1852, and they looked back wistfully but unrealistically to the days when their old party had been strong and national in scope. Their leaders in 1860 were old (Bell was 63 and Everett was 66) while the younger generation (Lincoln was 51, Douglas was 47, and Breckinridge only 39) would fight the war, determine the future of slavery, secession, and the relationship between the federal government and the states, and set the mold for new forms of freedom and nationalism in America.

This desire to return to the halcyon days of national unity caused the formation of the Constitutional Union Party. On May 9, 1860, the party met in convention in Baltimore and nominated Bell and Everett. From the vantage point at that precise moment in time, Bell and a few others actually believed in the possibility of victory although this feeling was probably illusory. Some felt that Bell and Everett could sweep the entire South and win just



John Bell
The Library of Congress



Edward Everett
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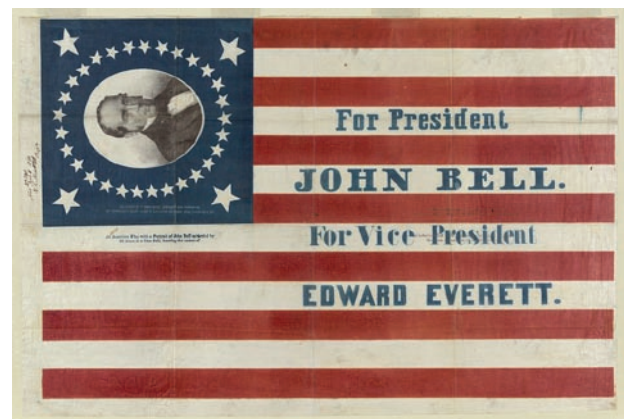
The Bell-Everett Flag

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enough states in the mid-Atlantic region to eke out an electoral victory. But their party platform, one of the shortest in American history, stood only for the Constitution, the Union, and the enforcement of the laws without at all stating any interpretation of what was meant. The split in the Democratic Party and the nomination of Lincoln by the Republicans only tended to exacerbate the rhetoric of the campaign, and the Bell-Everett ticket quickly lost support during the summer and fall months. On Election Day, November 6, 1860, they polled only 12% of the national popular vote and carried only Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia with 39 electoral votes.

During the secession crisis that immediately followed, most Constitutional Unionists in the slave states, forced to make a decision which way to go, joined the secessionists. Perhaps the best explanation for that phenomenon has been given by Civil War historian James McPherson, who has revealed that their Unionism was actually conditional. While they were strongly attracted to Unionism, it was based on the assumption that slavery would be protected and on a friendly interpretation of states' rights within that Union. When fighting began at Fort Sumter, this group saw Lincoln as the aggressor, and four of the eight border states seceded quickly while the loyalty of the other four remained questionable throughout the conflict. Bell himself denounced Lincoln and supported the Confederacy. In the spring of 1861, events flowed very quickly, and for the Constitutional Unionists attitudes changed quickly as well. As strange as it may seem now, a flag with Bell's and Everett's name on it raised in defiance of the Union may not have seemed to be the paradox it appears today. The flag is relatively small, measuring about 1'4" high

by 3' wide and was possibly used as a cavalry guidon although it is rectangular rather than swallowtail in appearance. It is easily recognized as a hand-sewn flag. The flag is all cotton. The seven stars in the canton are all 4-pointed rather than the standard 5-pointed stars. They vary somewhat in size and shape with the star in the center being noticeably larger. The number of stars in the canton and the red-white-red stripe pattern in the field both indicate that this was an early 1st National Confederate flag. The names are printed in ink on the white stripe on the field. Rich believed that the sections that make the white stripe were printed first and then sewn together with the red stripes producing the effect of the bottom part of Everett's name appearing to be cut off. It is unknown what Confederate unit this flag came from although it is possible it came from one raised in the upper South, such as Tennessee, Kentucky, or western Virginia where the Constitutional Unionists had been the most popular in the election of 1860. It is also unknown how the flag came to SHSI, but it is likely that it was originally taken from the Confederates by an Iowa volunteer regiment



Another example of a Bell-Everett Flag from 1860
Image from The Library of Congress • www.loc.gov