

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

John C. Breckinridge

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Kentuckians seemed always to be caught in the middle. Maybe it was the Bluegrass State's geographical position on the border between North and South, or perhaps it was the towering presence of her greatest statesman Henry Clay, the great compromiser. Whatever accounted for it, Kentucky and her sons faced dilemmas in the 1860s that strained families, loyalties, and hearts, in ways endured by few other Americans. Certainly that was the case with John Cabell Breckinridge, the man many thought inherited the mantle of Clay. The sectional controversy helped to make him, and it tried mightily to destroy him.

He came of a distinguished bloodline. His grandfather John Breckinridge moved the family from Virginia to Kentucky in 1793, settling an estate called Cabell's Dale outside Lexington. This Breckinridge made a place for himself in the sectional controversy by securing in the state legislature adoption of the Kentucky Resolutions of 1798. Though Jefferson was their author, myth attributed the resolves to Breckinridge, with their assertion of the right of state nullification of federal laws, one of the foundation stones of secession doctrine. John Breckinridge went on to serve in the United States Senate and then briefly as Jefferson's first attorney general before his untimely death in 1806. John Breckinridge's son Joseph Cabell Breckinridge tried to emulate his father's example, but he, too, died young while serving as speaker of the house in Kentucky's legislature in 1823.

A few years before, Joseph Cabell Breckinridge had married Mary Clay Smith, daughter of the president of the College of New Jersey [now Princeton University] and granddaughter of the college's founder the Rev. John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. On January 16, 1821, she gave him his first and only son, born at their home Thorn Hill in Lexington, John Cabell Breckinridge. It was on this infant boy that the family pinned its expectations of someone to continue the heritage of the first John Breckinridge.

John C. Breckinridge grew up in Lexington, fatherless, but much influenced by his several uncles, particularly Robert Jefferson Breckinridge. The family was almost all Jeffersonian Republicans, devout Presbyterians opposed in principal to slavery, but also

opposed to any form of abolition other than voluntary emancipation, believing as they did that the central government could not interfere in the individual states' institutions. Young Breckinridge and his widowed mother moved to Cabell's Dale, and he attended the Kentucky Academy at Pisgah, and then in 1834 entered Centre College at Danville, a Presbyterian school run by his uncle John Young. After four years at Centre, Breckinridge went east to the College of New Jersey for six months of pre-law study, after which he returned home and read law under Judge William Owsley, a prominent jurist and leader in the new Whig Party that arose in opposition to Andrew Jackson's Democrats. Most of the Breckinridge's adhered to the new party, but at about this time young John C. Breckinridge began to find Democratic ideas more persuasive. When he finished reading law, Breckinridge spent a year at Lexington's Transylvania University, and graduated in 1841 with an LL.B. degree and an almost perfect academic record. One day after graduation he was admitted to the Kentucky bar.

While Breckinridge immediately commenced a law practice in Frankfort, he did not prosper, and that plus an unrequited love affair persuaded him to start anew in the Iowa territory. After two years there he came back to Lexington, established what would become a flourishing practice, and met and married Mary Cyrene Burch on December 12, 1843. For the next several years he practiced successfully, began to raise a family, and shocked some of his family by becoming more and more a confirmed Democrat. He did not rush to enlist when war broke out with Mexico in 1846, but a year later, he delivered such an impressive oration over Kentucky dead brought home from the war that he was commissioned major of the 3rd Kentucky Volunteers without seeking the position, and soon left for a year in Mexico. He saw no combat, but learned a lot about management of men and materiel, and moreover became acquainted with some of the leading younger soldiers of the day, men he would work with intimately in a different uniform some years hence.

Being a Breckinridge, it was almost inevitable that he would be drawn into active politics, and the time came on his return from Mexico when he won a seat in the legislature. Then in October 1850, when Henry Clay came home to Lexington after passage of the Omnibus Bill better known as the Compromise of 1850, Breckinridge was selected to give a welcoming speech, and it was so eloquent that Clay all but endorsed young Breckinridge for higher office. The next year Breckinridge won Clay's old seat in Congress, and was reelected in 1853. He quickly became one of the more dynamic young statesmen in Washington, often linked with Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, and Breckinridge himself acquired unusual influence with President Franklin Pierce, using it to get Pierce to sign off on the Kansas-Nebraska legislation that essentially repealed the Missouri Compromise.

In 1855 Breckinridge did not seek reelection, needing to repair his personal finances and attend to his law practice, but in 1856 the Democratic convention nominated him for the vice presidency, and in the fall of that year he and James Buchanan were elected. Theirs was not a happy partnership. Buchanan was weak, indecisive, and vacillating. Moreover, he was jealous of his more popular running mate, and probably

harbored distrust as a result of Breckinridge's close association with Buchanan's rival Douglas. As a result, Breckinridge played almost no role in their administration, did not have Buchanan's confidence, and was not consulted or involved in the administration's fumbling handling of the sectional crisis. As 1860 approached, many Democrats spoke of Breckinridge as a presidential contender, but he seems to have realized that his party was so fragmented that only a candidate who could unite all sections would have a chance, and he was too closely allied in the public mind with the more extreme Southern rights wing of the party.

When the party did split in convention, and the Southern rights wing nominated him, he at first intended to decline, until persuaded that if he accepted, it would force the Northern Democrats' candidate Douglas to withdraw as well, and then a compromise candidate could be found. But Douglas would not agree to the bargain, and so Breckinridge remained in the race. Though never an extremist himself, and entirely out of sympathy with the Fire-Eaters who were destroying the party and the Union, he felt that he had to try to represent the views of conservatives who opposed federal interference with slavery in the territories, though still personally opposed to slavery himself. On election day, as predicted, the Democrats split their votes and gave Lincoln the election, though Breckinridge came in second to Lincoln in the Electoral College. As vice president, he presided over the official count of electoral votes, and declared Lincoln the winner, firmly condemning any efforts to disrupt the proceeding.

In the fall of 1859 the Kentucky legislature had elected Breckinridge to the Senate for the term beginning in 1861, and so when he left his chair as vice president he was immediately sworn in as a member of the United States Senate. There for the next several months he spoke out against extremism, sometimes supporting his friend Lincoln's administration, but opposing all attempts to coerce South Carolina and other seceding states into remaining in the Union. Not a friend of secession, Breckinridge still believed that Washington did not constitutionally have the power to force a state to stay. At the same time he believed that coercion, and military conflict, would only exacerbate Southern feelings, and make it more difficult for a reconciliation, which is the end he always sought.

By the summer of 1861 Breckinridge's position was becoming increasingly untenable. In the public eye his speeches against the administration and his expressions of sympathy for Confederate soldiers wounded in the Battle of Bull Run, convinced more and more that he was a traitor in spite of his protestations of loyalty to the Union. Back in Kentucky a struggle raged between Union and Confederate sympathizers for control of the state, and on September 18 the state legislature finally sided with the North. At once the political arrests began, and the next day Breckinridge's political foes persuaded Union military authorities that he was too dangerous to run free in the state. Advised of the order for his arrest, Breckinridge made the choice he had been avoiding. As between languishing in prison as a political prisoner for doing nothing more than speaking out as was his right as a Senator and an American, he would cross the line into the Confederacy. It was a decision he ever after regretted being forced to make.

The Confederacy welcomed Breckinridge warmly, not for his military experience—which was very limited—but for his personal prestige. Jefferson Davis immediately commissioned him a brigadier general and assigned him to the small army being raised in Bowling Green, Kentucky under General Albert Sidney Johnston. In February 1862, when Johnston had to abandon his line in Kentucky, he reorganized his army into four corps, eventually giving Breckinridge command of the smallest, the Reserve Corps, just six days before the army went into action. On April 6, at Shiloh, Johnston at first did not intend to put Breckinridge into action, but the battle quickly got out of hand and sucked the Reserve into its maw along with the rest of the Confederate army. In his first action, Breckinridge performed very well, showed that he was cool under fire, could think and act, and command the obedience of his men. Like other generals that day, he did not control his command very well, as it was a learning experience for all of them, but still he did well, being in on the capture of the Hornets' Nest late in the day.

When the Confederates were driven from the field the next day, Breckinridge covered the retreat to Corinth, winning promotion to major general on April 14. Soon he was ordered to take his small corps to Vicksburg to aid in defending that bastion on the Mississippi River. After several weeks there, he was ordered south to take Baton Rouge, and in a combined land and naval operation largely planned by Breckinridge, the Confederates attacked and all but took the town on August 5 until the failure of the naval component forced Breckinridge to retire. But instead he identified the bluffs at nearby Port Hudson as a prime location for defending the river against naval approach from below, and began fortifying the heights that would stand as a major defense for the next year.

That summer General Braxton Bragg, commanding now after the death of Johnston, planned a major invasion of Kentucky to wrest it back from the Yankees, and he wanted Kentuckians like Breckinridge with him for the moral force they might exert in the Bluegrass. One delay after another kept Breckinridge from reaching Bragg in time for the abortive invasion, but he did link with him late that fall. At the Battle of Stones River at the end of December and early January 1863, Breckinridge commanded a division in the action, and conducted what was for its time one of the greatest infantry assaults yet. He did it against his wishes, and the severe pummeling his division received, in addition to other provocations, cemented his place among the dissidents opposed to Bragg's command of the army. For the next year Breckinridge would be the object of Bragg's animosity, and occasional plotting, while he himself stayed out of the active scheming and politicking done by other Bragg opponents, though there was no doubt where his sympathies stood.

In the summer of 1863 Breckinridge returned to Vicksburg in the abortive attempt to relieve the beleaguered garrison there. He got only as far as Jackson, Mississippi, where he commanded part of Joseph E. Johnston's army in the defeat that was too little and too late. Breckinridge was soon ordered back to Bragg, and commanded his division at the Battle of Chickamauga, where his hard-hitting attacks helped to open the gap in the

Union line that led to the rout of its army. Shortly he took command of a corps in Bragg's army as it besieged the Yankees in Chattanooga. On November 23 Breckinridge was in command of the line on Lookout Mountain when it fell to the Yankees, and two days later his corps, spread too thin on a line far too long, fell back in a rout from Missionary Ridge. Bragg would try hard to blame the defeat on Breckinridge, accusing him of being drunk and absent from his command, while ample evidence showed that Bragg was lying, just as he had when he had ordered subordinates to furnish him with perjured testimony a year before to try to lay blame for the defeat at Stones River on Breckinridge. In the end it was Bragg who suffered, resigning his command in disgrace.

In February 1864 Richmond assigned Breckinridge to command of the Trans-Allegheny or Western Department of Virginia, comprising the southwestern counties of the state that controlled the vital east-west rail link of the Confederacy, and a back door to invasion from Kentucky and East Tennessee. Breckinridge would intermittently hold this command for the next eleven months, his most notable achievement being his victory in the Battle of New Market on May 15, 1864, when he turned back a Yankee invasion of the Shenandoah Valley. Immediately afterward he was called east to join Robert E. Lee's army as it faced advancing Federals pressing toward Richmond. Breckinridge held the center of Lee's line at Cold Harbor, suffering a serious injury when his horse was killed under him, yet went back into action, and later commanded in the defense of Lynchburg from a sick litter.

That summer Breckinridge commanded a corps in the army of General Jubal Early as it marched into Maryland and tried to threaten Washington. Breckinridge himself chiefly directed the Battle of Monocacy, and later served with Early in the battles at Kernstown and Winchester in the unsuccessful defense of the Shenandoah against Sheridan. That fall there were calls in the army for Breckinridge to replace Early in command, but Richmond instead sent him back to southwest Virginia. Then in February 1865 Jefferson Davis made Breckinridge secretary of war. By that time, Breckinridge recognized that the war was lost, and directed all his efforts toward bringing about an honorable surrender on terms that would get the best conditions possible for the South in a reunited Union. Consequently, he engaged in a steady, yet respectful, tug of war with President Davis that lasted through the evacuation of Richmond, and on through the flight of the government. Present at the surrender negotiations of the Army of Tennessee in mid-April, Breckinridge commanded the fleeing government party and escort until it broke up on May 4 in Georgia.

After the capture of Davis, Breckinridge himself made a hair-raising escape through Georgia and Florida and across the Straits of Florida to Cuba, where he issued orders calling on all remaining Confederate soldiers to disband and give their paroles. Thereafter he spent more than three years in Europe and Canada in exile, as multiple treason indictments were in effect against him in Kentucky and Washington. He spoke up repeatedly for reconciliation and amity between the sections, and finally returned to Lexington early in 1869 after a general amnesty. He lived only another 6 years, his health ravaged by the war. He resumed his law practice, but also championed rebuilding,

becoming president of a life insurance company, helping construct a railroad in eastern Kentucky, and fostering education and some degree of equal rights for former slaves. He died at his home in Lexington of pneumonia resulting from complications of his war injury on May 17, 1875, and is buried in Lexington Cemetery.

John Cabell Breckinridge

Born	January 16, 1821 Lexington Kentucky
Died	May 17, 1875 Lexington Kentucky
Buried	Lexington Cemetery
Father	Joseph Cabell Breckinridge
Mother	Mary Clay Smith
Career Milestones	United States Congressman, Senator, Vice President and presidential candidate General in the Confederate Army Confederate Secretary of War
