

Biographies of western delegates who attended the 1861 Virginia Secession Convention were transcribed by undergraduate students enrolled in Dr. Billy Joe Peyton's Fall 2010 "Introduction to Public History" class at West Virginia State University.

By Patricia Mosley

WAITMAN THOMAS WILLEY, of Monogalia County (now in West Virginia), was born on October 18, 1811, in a log cabin near Farmington, Marion County (now in West Virginia), and was the son of William Willey, a native of Delaware. Willey was a lawyer and practiced at Morgantown, Monogalia County. He was married to Elizabeth E. Ray. He was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates from 1832 to 1837 and of the Virginia Senate from 1839 to 1847. He was also a member of the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1850-1851.

Willey was an active Whig and was one of the leaders of that party in western Virginia during the years before the war. In 1859 he was a candidate for the lieutenant-governorship of Virginia, running on the same ticket with WILLIAM L. GOGGIN, but he was defeated by ROBERT MONTAGUE.

As a delegate from Monogalia County in the Virginia State Convention, Willey was a member of the Committee on Federal Relations. He was a strong Unionist and an opponent of secession, but he also distinguished himself during the Convention in an effort to amend the Virginia Constitution so as to make the taxes on slaves more nearly proportionate to the taxes on other forms of property, and he was named chairman of a special committee appointed to report on this question.

Willey voted against secession on April 4 and on April 17. Because of his subsequent Unionist activities, he was ordered expelled from the Virginia Convention "for disloyalty" to the commonwealth and to the Confederacy. He was a member of the Wheeling (or Restored Government) Convention and he was also a member of the first Constitutional Convention of West Virginia. In the meantime he had been elected from "loyal" Virginia to the Senate of the United States and served there from 1861 to 1863. In the latter year, Willey was again elected to the Senate, this time from West Virginia, and he served until 1871. He then resumed the practice of law and was a member of the West Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1872. His last public service was as clerk of Monogalia County, a position he held from 1882 until his death in Morgantown on May 2, 1900.

Sources: DAB, XX, 246-247; PMWV, pp. 158-161; Charles H Ambler (ed), Proceedings and Debates of the First Constitutional Convention of West Virginia, Introduction, pp. 100-102.