

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 Stacy Bloss

BENJAMIN WILSON BYRNE, of Braxton County (now in West Virginia), was born May 16, 1820, in Lewis County (now in West Virginia). He was the son of John B. Byrne and Anne Haymond Byrne. He was educated at Rector College in Pruntytown (now Williamsport), then in Harrison County. Byrne was a lawyer. He settled in Braxton County sometime before 1848 and married Mary Louisa Holt in 1849.

Byrne was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates during the session of 1848-1849 and again during the session of 1857-1858. He was interested in the development of western Virginia's petroleum resources and in January, 1861, he discovered a rich oil deposit on lands he had leased in Wirt County.

Byrne was elected to the Convention from the district comprising Braxton, Clay, Nicholas and Webster countries. As a conservative and a Unionist, he voted against secession both on April 4 and on April 17, but, like other moderate Unionists, he signed the ordinance of session in June, 1861. He served in the Confederate army during the war as nitre officer and later as enrolling officer at Staunton.

After the war he settled in Clay County, West Virginia, and represented that county in the West Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1872. That same year he was elected state superintendent of schools and served in that capacity until 1876. From 1883 to 1885 he was a member of the West Virginia Senate. He died September 12, 1903.

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Biography of West Virginia* (N.Y., 1894), pp. 116-118; William S. Laidley, *History of Charleston and Kanwha County* (Chicago, 1911), pp. 895-896, RGA, p. 354; *PMWV*, pp. 40, 57, 63.