

**A NARRATIVE OF THE LEADING
INCIDENTS OF THE
ORGANIZATION OF THE FIRST
POPULAR MOVEMENT IN
VIRGINIA IN 1865. PP. 3-69**

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ALEX H. H. STUART

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A NARRATIVE
OF THE
LEADING INCIDENTS OF THE ORGANIZATION
OF THE FIRST
Popular Movement in Virginia
IN 1865
TO
RE-ESTABLISH PEACEFUL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE
NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN STATES, AND OF
THE SUBSEQUENT EFFORTS
OF THE
"Committee of Nine," in 1869,
TO SECURE THE
RESTORATION OF VIRGINIA TO THE UNION,
BY
ALEX. H. H. STUART.

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A NARRATIVE.

CHAPTER I.

Several years ago the Virginia Historical Society adopted a resolution, of which the following is a copy :

Resolved, That the Hon. A. H. H. Stuart be requested to prepare for this Society a history of the events of 1869, which led to a restoration of this State to its place in the Union, in which he himself bore so distinguished a part.

An official copy of this resolution was sent to me, to which I replied, expressing my willingness to comply with the request of the Society at as early a day as might be practicable, and at once I proceeded to collect such papers as I thought would be necessary to enable me to do so. But, unfortunately, sickness and other causes compelled me to postpone the fulfillment of my promise to a future day. Time having brought improved health and spirits, I now venture to enter on the performance of the task so long delayed.

In the outset, I wish it to be distinctly understood that I do not propose to write a full history of all that occurred in connection with the "events of 1869" referred to in the resolution of the Society. I have not the material necessary for such a history. Doubtless many things were said and done by others looking to the same end, of which I had no knowledge. All that I propose to do in this paper is to give a narrative of the leading facts and incidents relating to the subject, so far as I was personally connected with or had cognizance of them, accompanied by such papers as may be necessary to verify and explain them.

As I shall speak mainly of matters in which I was an actor or witness, it will readily be conceded that my statement should be made in the first person singular.

But I should feel that my work had been very imperfectly done if I failed, before entering on my narrative of the "events" especially referred to in the resolution of the Society, to refer to others of an

antecedent date, which were not less important than the "events of 1869," and which, in fact, opened the way for them. A knowledge of these facts is necessary to enable the reader to understand the condition of public affairs in 1868-'9. They supply an important link in the history of Virginia, from the downfall of the Confederacy to the restoration of the State to the Union. I deem it proper to refer to these events, not only on account of their intrinsic interest as matters of history, but because no permanent record has been made of them, and they are liable to be forgotten, with the men who participated in them.

It will be remembered that it was the practice of General David Hunter, in his raid through Virginia, to destroy all the newspaper offices by breaking up their presses and scattering their type in the streets. The publication of newspapers was in this way effectually suppressed; and in Staunton, the place of my residence, the only means of printing anything was by an old hand-press, which had escaped the notice of the destroyer, and such type as had been rescued from the gutter into which it had been thrown. Thus no record of passing events was preserved in files of newspapers, issued from day to day, and the only authentic report of the proceedings of one of the most important popular meetings ever held in Augusta county is to be found in a few copies of an unsightly hand-bill, which was printed on the day after it was held, with the press and type above referred to.

As this meeting set on foot the first organized popular movement for "peace," I cannot doubt that I will render an acceptable service to the public by putting the record of its proceedings in a more enduring form, and placing it under the guardianship of the Virginia Historical Society.

The meeting to which I refer, was a large assemblage of the best people of Augusta county, held at their courthouse in Staunton on 8th of May, 1865, in pursuance of a notice which had been circulated as widely as possible during the preceding week.

The circumstances under which the meeting was held were these: While intelligent and thoughtful men, who were correctly informed as to the exhausted condition of the Confederate treasury, of the absence of supplies of food, clothing, arms, and ammunition necessary to maintain an army in the field, and, above all, of the disparity of numbers and equipment of the troops which were arrayed under the banners of Grant and Lee respectively at the opening of the campaign of 1865, had been forced to the conclusion that the days

of the Confederacy were numbered, such was not the belief among the masses of the people in the country. They had been misled to some extent by the defiant attitude assumed by the Confederate Government, and in larger measure by their unbounded confidence in the abilities of their great leaders, Lee and Johnston, and their associates, which caused them still to cling to the hope of final success.

When, therefore, it became known to the people of Virginia, in April, 1865, that President Davis and his Cabinet and other executive officers of the Confederate Government, and Governor William Smith and the other State officers of Virginia, had been compelled to withdraw from Richmond, and that General Lee had been obliged to evacuate the city and retreat southward with the remnant of his starving army—followed as this news was, in a few days, by intelligence of the surrender of General Lee's army at Appomattox, and the capitulation of General Johnston and his army—the tidings fell on the popular ear like a "fireball in the night," filling the public mind with consternation and dismay!

Men of forecast saw at once that the Confederate cause was lost, and that a continuance of the struggle was hopeless and could result only in a wanton waste of blood and treasure, and an aggravation of the calamities which were inevitable. They saw, further, that we had been reduced to the sad condition of a people without any government, State or Federal. The Confederate Government had practically ceased to exist. The State Government had been overthrown. The officers of both were refugees, and there was no reasonable prospect of the re-establishment of either. Every social bond had been ruptured. Society had been resolved into its original elements. All laws had become inoperative for want of officers to enforce them. All the safeguards of life, liberty, and property had been uprooted. Scenes of lawless violence and rapine were rife in the country. There were no officials who would be recognized as having authority to represent the people or to give expression to their opinions and wishes.

In a word, a condition of things had arisen in which, if the people wished their voice to be heard, they must speak for themselves!

Such was the state of affairs which existed about the first of May, 1865, when half a dozen or more intelligent gentlemen of Staunton met together, informally, to consider and decide what should be done to meet the emergency which confronted them. After full and free discussion of the subject in all its aspects, they concluded that

the wisest course would be to convoke a mass-meeting of the people of Augusta county, to assemble at their courthouse on Monday, 8th of May, 1865, to decide for themselves.

Notices were accordingly issued, inviting the people to assemble at the time and place above mentioned to give formal expression to their sentiments on the grave questions to be submitted for their consideration. These notices were widely circulated by means of special messengers sent to all parts of the county during the week preceding the day appointed for the meeting; and on Sunday, the day before it was to be held, it naturally became the topic of conversation among the people at their homes, on the highways, and at their respective places of public worship. In this way the purpose to hold the meeting and its objects became known to almost every man in the county, and to many in adjacent counties.

Among those who thus became acquainted with the purpose of the people of Augusta to hold the meeting on the 8th of May, and the subjects to be considered by it, was Governor William Smith. After he had been obliged to leave Richmond, before its formal evacuation, he had sought refuge in a secluded part of Rockbridge county. On learning the facts above stated, and doubtless influenced by a patriotic sense of official duty, he rode to Staunton, a distance of twenty-five miles or more, where he arrived about noon on Sunday, 7th May. Soon after his arrival, he sent invitations to a number of gentlemen who had been most active in getting up the "mass-meeting," requesting them to call on him at his hotel at 3 o'clock P. M. for conference.

I was one of those invited, and at the hour appointed, accompanied by fifteen or twenty other gentlemen, went to the hotel, where we were politely received by the Governor. After the ordinary interchange of salutations and introductions, Governor Smith proceeded to open the interview by referring to the rumors he had heard of the proposed meeting and its objects. Without expressing any opinion, either favorable or unfavorable, to the objects which we had in view, he made known, in decided terms, his opposition to our holding it, on the ground that the proceeding would be irregular, and, to some extent, revolutionary. He referred to the fact that he was the Governor of Virginia, and as such the constitutional representative of the State, and the only person empowered to open negotiations with the Federal authorities to secure peace and the restoration of the State to the Union. He insisted it was not competent for the people of any single county to inaugurate such a

movement, thereby ignoring him and his constitutional powers and duties as chief executive officer of the Commonwealth, and therefore urged us to abandon the idea of holding the proposed meeting.

In reply, it was stated that while under a normal condition of public affairs, in which he would be recognized as the lawful Governor of the State of Virginia, his views would be entitled to great weight, yet we thought it was obvious that he who had been a distinguished general in the military service of the Confederate States, and who had been elected Governor of *one of the Confederate States*, under the auspices of the Confederacy, and had taken an oath of allegiance to its government, could not possibly be recognized by the Federal Government as the lawful Governor and constitutional representative of the State of Virginia under the new order of things. Such a recognition would be almost equivalent to a recognition of the Confederate Government itself. All purpose to ignore him or offer him any personal disrespect was earnestly disclaimed; but facts were stubborn things, which could not be ignored. They must be dealt with as they existed. The Confederate Government had collapsed, and there was no reasonable prospect of its ever being re-established. The State Government had been overthrown. We were, therefore, without any government and liable at any time to be overwhelmed by all the horrors of anarchy. We had no representatives who would be recognized as having a right to speak for the people, and hence they must speak for themselves. He was told he was mistaken in supposing that the people of Augusta proposed to act on *behalf of the State*. They claimed no such right. They meant only to give expression to the sentiments and wishes of the county of Augusta, leaving every other county free to take such action as its people might deem proper. The demand for prompt and decided action by the people was urgent. They could not afford to wait for the result of tedious and probably ineffectual diplomatic negotiation, and therefore we must persist in holding the proposed meeting. The conference then closed, without unkind feeling on either side, for each respected the motives of the other, and Governor Smith returned to Rockbridge.

Before dismissing the subject of this interview, it may be proper to say that the sequel proved the soundness of the reasoning of the advocates of the meeting and the fallacy of that of Governor Smith.

The meeting having been held on the 8th of May, and a committee appointed to go to Richmond to confer with the military authorities, it was received with courtesy and attention by the gen-

eral in command as representing the people. But when Governor Smith shortly afterwards, in his official character, appointed commissioners to negotiate with the military authorities, as soon as these gentlemen presented their credentials they were arrested and held as prisoners, and a reward of \$25,000 was offered for the capture of the Governor and the delivery of his person to the officer in command! But, to the honor of our people, it must be added that no one could be tempted, even by such a munificent reward, to play the part of Judas Iscariot!

After the close of the conference with Governor Smith on Sunday afternoon (7th May, 1865), I was notified that it was the wish of the gentlemen who had been most active in getting up the meeting on the 8th that I should preside over its deliberations, and that on taking the chair I should make an address to the people, explaining the objects and purposes of those who called it, with such suggestions as to the policy to be pursued as I might deem appropriate.

After careful consideration, I concluded that in view of the gravity and importance of the questions to be submitted to the meeting, and of the liability of an oral address to be misunderstood and misrepresented, it would be best to commit to writing what I proposed to say. The occasion involved weighty responsibilities. It was proper that the words used should be not only well weighed, but plain and simple, such as could be readily understood by all who might be present. Another fact admonished me of the necessity for caution. A large body of Federal troops occupied the town of Harrisonburg, twenty-five miles distant, and I felt confident that a number of their enterprising "Jesse Scouts" would be present as vigilant spectators and reporters of the proceedings of the meeting. I therefore wrote in advance the address which I proposed to make.

At an early hour on the 8th of May, the people began to assemble in the streets and public grounds near the courthouse to interchange opinions and discuss the great questions which they had been invited to consider and decide. Their solemn countenances and earnest demeanor indicated that they clearly understood and appreciated the gravity of the situation.

Before the hour of 12 M., which had been appointed for the organization of the meeting, a great crowd had assembled in the courthouse, which embodied a large share of the intelligence, patriotism and property of the county. It was in all respects a *representative meeting*, and therefore entitled to give authentic expression to the sentiments and wishes of the people of the county.