In September 1863, a little over two years into the American Civil War, seventy-two men gathered in rural Winn Parish in Confederate Louisiana to draft a document swearing allegiance to the United States of America. These Unionists had not supported a secessionist candidate in the 1860 presidential election, nor had they supported Louisiana’s secession from the United States in 1861. After the Civil War started, they were reluctant to serve, especially as conscription laws became stricter. Their lack of support for the Confederacy undoubtedly drew disapproval from neighbors, and their unwillingness to serve in the Confederate Army marked them as criminals. These men, therefore, feared for their personal safety and for their families and property. An analysis of the document these men wrote reveals these concerns and a clear Unionist theme.1

This study will use the words of these seventy-two men as expressed in the document they signed to show how they felt in September 1863, two years into the war, and to show the motivations for those sentiments. They declared their purpose “to make known our principles” in the preamble, and four main themes become evident in the ten resolutions, or articles, that follow in the document. First, they felt the United States to be “the most democratic and best form of government.” Therefore, in the 1860 presidential election, these men did not support the secessionist candidate who would have separated them from that government.

1For the text of the document see The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), Series I, Vol. 30 (Part III), 732-733. All references to the document are from this source.
Second, they did not support Louisiana’s secession from the United States at the 1861 Secession Convention, as they were aware the secession question had not been decided by “a vote of the people,” and they were convinced their voices had not been heard. Third, they had not supported the war and felt that any “allegiance to the Confederate States” had been “compelled by the sword.” And fourth, because they were ostracized by neighbors and military for not supporting the Confederacy, they declared a need “for the protection of our homes, lives, and property.”

Unionist sentiment like that in Winn Parish was common in the Confederacy. Several historians have published broad studies that analyze the internal conflict such disunion caused within the Confederate States. Other historians focused their research on Unionism within Louisiana. And at least one study focuses primarily on Unionism within Winn Parish. However, that local study provides only a general overview and does not report on the perspective of this single group of Winn Parish citizens and their personal motives for writing a document pledging allegiance to the “enemy.” Whereas these previous studies analyze the actions of Unionists within the Confederacy or show the Unionist perspective from local, state, and military authorities, the current study gets inside the heads of these ordinary citizens and reveals their frustration and desperation based upon their own words.

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Their frustration began in the United States presidential election of 1860. Few voters in the South supported the Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln in that election. The decision for southerners, therefore, was whether to support the Southern Democrat candidate who strongly advocated secession from the United States if Lincoln won the election, or to support one of the two cooperationist candidates, the Democrat or the Constitutional Unionist, who both advocated a more peaceful solution than immediate secession. On October 13, 1860, the West Baton Rouge Parish Sugar Planter reported that some voters in Winn Parish were "warm advocates of the election of [the] Constitutional Union candidates—Bell and [vice-presidential candidate] Everett." John Bell opposed secession from the United States on the grounds that it was unconstitutional and advocated trying to find solutions that were constitutionally legal. The other cooperationist candidate in 1860, Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, was strongly Unionist because he opposed disunion of any kind. In 1860 the Southern Sentinel began publication in Winnfield "to champion the Douglas electoral ticket." On July 28, 1860, the Carrollton Sun reported that on July 18 voters had gathered in Winnfield "for the purpose of taking measures to open and conduct the Presidential canvass...and after consultation, it was finally agreed to request the Parish Democratic Central (Douglas) Committee to call a regular meeting for the fourth Saturday in August next." And on October 5, 1860, the New Orleans Daily Crescent reported that Winnfield in Winn Parish was one of several cities in the state that had held a Union barbecue the previous month. Both cooperationist candidates, therefore, had strong support in Winn Parish in the 1860 presidential election.

Although Douglas and Bell received substantial votes in Winn Parish, the secessionist candidate John C. Breckenridge carried the parish. Breckenridge was the Southern Democrat candidate who advocated immediate secession if Lincoln won the

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5Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana (Nashville: Southern Publishing Company, 1890), 166.
election. He received 354 or 41.5% of the votes. Douglas received 240 or 28% of the votes, the highest vote for Douglas in any north Louisiana parish except Ouachita. And Bell received 260 or 30.5% of the votes. The two anti-secessionist candidates together actually received a majority 58.5% of the votes, showing that Winn Parish did not support the candidate who advocated separation from the United States. The seventy-two men who signed the document declare, in article number three, their belief in the efficacy of the United States government as “the most democratic and best form of government now in existence.” Their praise of the United States government shows they did not want to be separated from that government. Therefore, they would not have supported a presidential candidate in 1860 who advocated secession from the Union.

After Lincoln’s election in November 1860, the signatories’ hope for a cooperationist solution that would allow Louisiana to remain a part of the United States looked bleak. Louisiana followed other southern states in calling for a convention to decide the question of secession. Representative delegates were elected from each parish and senatorial delegates were elected from each district to attend the convention in Baton Rouge. In the election for the Winn Parish representative delegate, the cooperationist candidate David Pierson received 507 votes while the secession candidate John D. Strother received 88 votes. In the election for senatorial delegate, Winn Parish’s district, which also included Caldwell and Catahoula Parishes, cast 505 votes for the cooperationist candidate Wade H. Hough and 66 votes for the secessionist candidate Jacob Humble. On January 26, 1861, when the delegates in Baton Rouge voted 113 to 17 to secede from the Union, David Pierson was one of only seventeen who voted against secession and one of seven who refused to sign the ordinance once it passed. In a letter to his father,

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6 Davis, 154.
7 Biographical and Historical Memoirs, 490.
Pierson explained that he “was opposed to Secession” because he “thought it would lead to the present difficulties [Civil War]” and he believed “there was room to hope for a pacific settlement of the difficulties between the two sections.”

These election returns for Winn Parish and Pierson’s attitude toward secession show a prevailing Unionist sentiment in Winn Parish and support for a cooperationist solution that would prevent secession. The seventy-two men who signed the document declare in article number four “that we are certain the State of Louisiana did not secede from the United States Government by a vote of the people.” And, in fact, secession was never put to the test of a popular vote. These seventy-two men were acutely aware that they themselves had not voted for secession and that the local preference for a cooperationist solution had been silenced somewhere between Winn Parish and Baton Rouge.

On April 12, 1861, with declaration of war, these men were expected to enlist in the Confederate Army to fight for a cause they opposed. The first wave of enlistees for Confederate military service were volunteers who were sent outside of Louisiana to fight. On January 23, 1862, the Louisiana Militia Act required all males 18-45 to enroll in the militia. In December of that year, New Orleans fell to Union troops, so on January 3, 1863, with the enemy so close and the need to build the fighting ranks, Louisiana passed a new Militia Act. This new act required all males 17-50 to enroll in the militia with the promise they would serve only in Louisiana for twelve months and receive $50 bounty and 80 acres land. Anyone who did not report within ten days would be considered deserting. Apparently, too few conscripts reported for duty, so in June 1863 a new Louisiana Militia Act authorized severe penalties for those who did not immediately report for duty when called.

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Only nineteen of the men who signed the resolution document have been located in the Confederate Army service records, and all nineteen eventually deserted. On August 28, 1861, the Shreveport South-Western reported an August 24 meeting in Winnfield “for the purpose of devising means by which men of the parish who are able and not willing to support the volunteers, can be reached. “The signatories had opposed secession and the war, so their opposition to conscription cannot be imagined. They declare in article number two “that we hold no further allegiance to the Confederate States except when overpowered and compelled by the sword” and in article number one “that we have undoubted evidence that the Confederate States are designed to be very aristocratic and exceedingly oppressive in its form of government.” This attitude is a reaction to the Confederate States’ oppressive policies of conscription and being forced to participate in a war they did not support. Following the disappointments of the 1860 Presidential Election and the 1861 Secession Convention, these men were not enthusiastic supporters of the war. Like David Pierson, they likely had foreseen that secession “would lead to the present difficulties.”

Anyone not willing to volunteer or support the war effort came under suspicion from “watchful secessionist neighbors” and were subject to “intimidation by Confederate soldiers.” In a directive dated September 1, 1863, Colonel A. B. Burleson was ordered into Winn Parish to search for deserters:

From the disaffection existing and growing in the parishes of Jackson and Winn, La., caused in the main by deserters and stragglers from our army, I am directed by Lieut. Gen. E. Kirby Smith to inform you that orders have this day been issued to you to proceed with a part of your command to these parishes, and get possession of all deserters, stragglers, and enrolled men.


You will first give notice to all such to report to such a place or places as you may indicate. Should they refuse to obey your orders to do so, you will then make such efforts to carry out your orders as will insure your success.13

In addition to this pressure from the Confederate Army, these men also felt threatened as they saw the war moving ever closer to home. One of the complaints concerning the 1863 Louisiana Militia Act had been that there would be no one left to protect homes, women, and children.14 This lack of protection on the home front explains why the men had not enlisted or had deserted when conscription extended their enlistment. And in 1863, there was every reason to want to stay close to home. In May General Nathaniel Banks marched to Alexandria fifty miles south of Winnfield, and in July Vicksburg and Port Hudson fell to Union forces. Also, in May, General John Walker’s Texas Division of the Confederate Army, on a march from Monroe to Campti enroute to Alexandria, passed through the town of Vernon in Jackson Parish.15 This is the same area in which the seventy-two men lived, so it is likely these troops would have marched through their farms. Also, in May, Union forces marched from Natchez, Mississippi, to Fort Beauregard in Harrisonburg, only fifty miles from northeast Winn Parish. The Union troops retreated, but when the fort was threatened again in early September, Confederate Lieutenant Colonel George W. Logan destroyed the fort before letting it fall into the hands of Union troops.16 Also in 1863 Confederate General Kirby Smith sent two companies of William Quantrill’s Raiders to police “speculators and cotton thieves in northeast Louisiana.” As they had done in Missouri and Kansas, these Confederate guerrilla fighters did what they

14 Bragg, 143.
16 Bragg, 158.
wanted, terrorizing and stealing, until Kirby Smith had to order them out of the region and send in replacements toward end of 1863.17

With these dangers so close to home and with intimidation from the Confederate Army, these men feared for the safety of their families and property. Only two days after Colonel Burleson’s directive was written, the seventy-two men in Winn Parish penned their resolutions. The preamble to the document asserts that “it has obviously become necessary that we should embody ourselves for the protection of our homes, lives, and property.” These men felt their best hope for protection lay with the Union, and they declare in articles five, six, and seven “that we have only been kept from our loyalty to the United States by the force of arms and oppression,” “that we are willing to cordially welcome to our country the United States forces and flag of the Union,” and “that we use all available means to preserve the Union.” These men were ready and willing to prove this loyalty. Article eight expresses willingness and desire to form “a home guard company to assist the United States troops at any time in the protection of our homes, lives, and property.” Although they did not form a home guard, two of the signatories joined the Union Army’s 2nd Louisiana Cavalry in December 1863 and thirteen enlisted in the Union Army’s Louisiana Cavalry Scouts in April 1864.18

Their loyalty to the Union did not begin with this enlistment in the Union Army or even with their perceived oppression by the Confederacy. These men had been Unionists even before the 1860 Presidential Election, and an analysis of their personal circumstances shows why they were opposed to secession from the United States and how they would have the confidence and will to eventually produce the document defying the Confederacy. Of the sixty-four signatories who have been identified, all but two were farmers, and twenty-two of these were heads of small families,

suggesting they were just beginning to build their adult lives. Thirty-six of the signatories owned land and, with few exceptions, had received their land patents within the decade preceding the war and many within just a few years before war started. Therefore, war interrupted their lives at a pivotal, prosperous point. They were building families and a future, so they had no incentive to support a war that would disrupt their prosperity or to separate from a country that had provided that prosperity.

The men all lived in a heavily-wooded, isolated area in northeast Winn Parish that overlaps several miles into southern Jackson Parish. Although other farmers lived within this area, the population here was not as dense as that in other parts of the parish, and at least half the people who owned land in this northeast section signed the document. An analysis of land patent locations along with family names within households shows strong familial bonds within the community. Also, fifteen of the surnames on the document appear more than once, showing that multiple family members signed the document. Only six pairs of signatories with the same surname lived in the same household as father/son or brother/brother, meaning that the other nine signatories that shared surnames were familial relations who lived in separate households. Those fifteen surnames represent forty-one, more than half, of the men who signed the document. These men from Winn Parish were a close-knit group with strong familial ties, and this community bond provided the will to band together to protect their families and gave them the confidence to write a document defying the Confederacy.

On September 19, 1863, General Ulysses Grant included that document with a letter he sent from Vicksburg to Washington D. C. He wrote to General H. W. Halleck, “There is certainly a very fine


20 Ibid.
feeling existing in the State of Louisiana...toward the Union. I inclose [sic] you copies of resolutions sent me by citizens of...Louisiana...showing something of this feeling.21 He understood that, through these resolutions, these men meant to communicate their support for the Union. He understood they had never wished to be separated from the United States, a country that had given them prosperity. He understood they had been forced to be part of an oppressive Confederacy, and that defiance of that government had put their lives, families, and property in danger. Through their own words, he understood them to be Unionists.

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