

Mystery Monday: Wiley A. Murrell and the Committee of Vigilance

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Botetourt Co. VA
Committee of
Vigilance. See
2-3 lines down from
highlighted area—
“Wiley A. Murrell,”
and “Jas. A. Murrell.”
Richmond Enquirer, 12
March 1840, Botetourt
County, Vol. 36, No.
102, Page 4, Col. 2,
via
VirginiaChronicle.com.

(Click to enlarge.)

[Roberts Family, Murrell Family](#) *(Click for Family Tree)*

Our new, exciting find of the name of Wiley Anderson Murrell (1805-1885) in a newspaper gives us a bit of interesting information about him even though it is only a list. It also brings a bit of a mystery.

The heading of the paragraph in which we find his name is "Committee of Vigilance." So what is this committee? And why are there so many- about 143 total- listed on the committee?

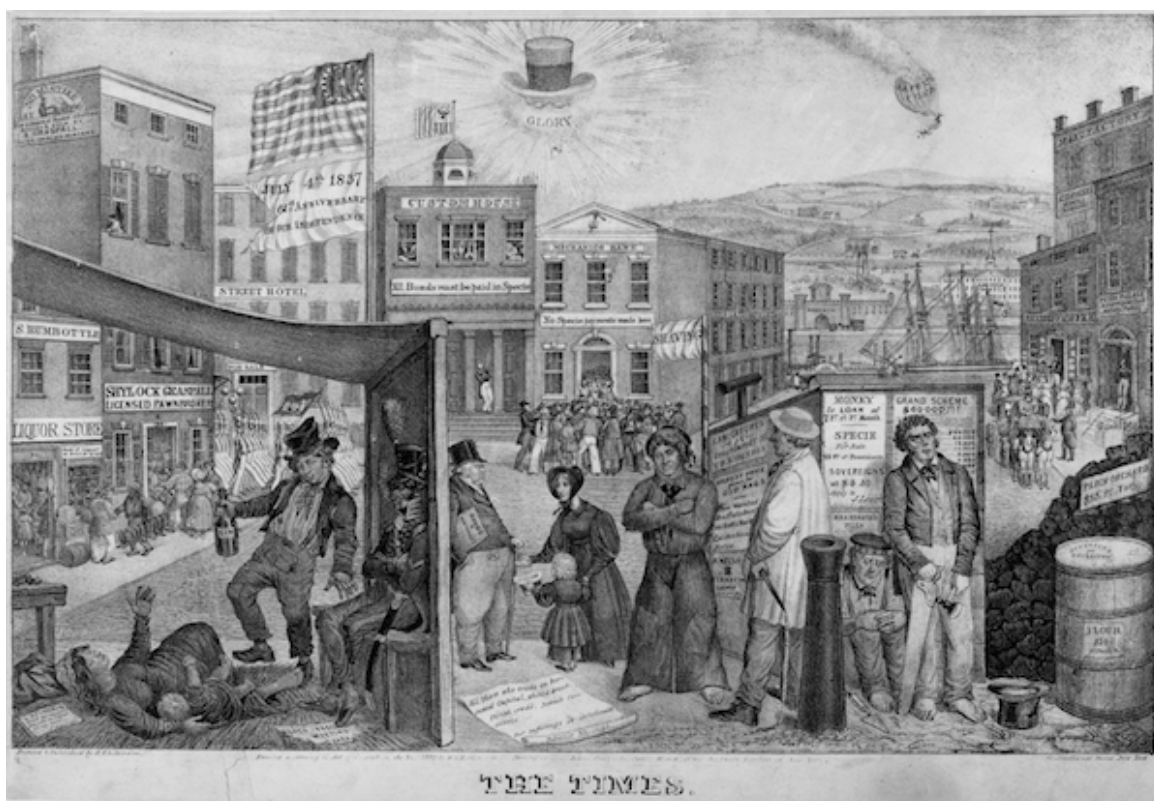
A Google search for 'committee of vigilance' indicates that these were groups of private citizens who helped maintain law and order, especially in frontier or sparsely populated areas where governmental law enforcement was insufficient.

In 1840, the County of Botetourt (pronounced "Bot-ih-tot" by locals) had a population of 11, 679 persons. The county had actually lost about 28% of its population since the previous census year (1830), but that was because the county of Roanoke was formed out of Botetourt, taking about 30% of the land. So the population likely did not become more sparse during that decade.

Doing some rough calculations for square miles, the population may have been about 15 persons/square mile. That may have been sparse enough that law enforcement would have needed help by the citizens. Since the county is bounded on the northwest by the Appalachian Mountains and on the southeast by the Blue Ridge Mountains, there is some rugged land there despite the majority of the county being in the Roanoke River Valley. Some of the mountains rise over 4,000 ft., so that was a lot of land for law enforcement to control.

Politically, abolition was one of the great divisors of our

society even back in 1830-1840. The Nat Turner Rebellion, a Virginia uprising of slaves in which 57 whites were killed, occurred in 1831, and other violence across the country occurred between slave owners and those who were anti-slavery. The Panic of 1837 occurred when New York City banks failed and unemployment levels were high, and climbing higher. (History repeats itself.)



"Aftermath of the Panic of 1837"- caricature by Edward Williams Clay, 1837. Lithograph image in public domain, via Wikipedia.com.

This Botetourt Co. Committee of Vigilance was formed at the Democratic State Convention on 22 Feb 1840. Other counties also had their own committees.

A man's politics (women could not vote, of course) was important back in those days, and known to all the neighbors. The Democrats had elected Martin Van Buren as President in 1836, and he was to become the candidate again in 1840 at the national convention. The convention was unable to decide on a Vice-Presidential candidate, however, and three men divided

that vote within the Electoral College.

The Whigs- there were no Republicans as we know them at that point- for the first time decided to support one candidate instead of several. They chose William Henry Harrison, who, although born in Virginia, was considered a Northerner since Ohio was his residence. Harrison was wealthy and well-educated, born of wealthy planters and himself a slave-owner, and a 'hero' of the Indian Wars. Despite all this, he was promoted as a 'common man' with a 'log cabin' image.

The Harrison campaign painted Van Buren as snobbish and out of touch with his constituents, wealthy, and extravagant with the taxes of the American people. Van Buren, however, was of 'common' stock in reality, as his father was a tavern-keeper. As President, he had refused to admit Texas to the Union as it would have upset the balance of slave and free states. (He later ran as an abolitionist.) Van Buren was the first American President who was born an American citizen, not British.

Rather than talk about actual important national issues, in 1840 the Whigs focused on the failed policies of the President's Democratic administration. This was the first election in which a candidate actually campaigned, and the Whigs did well, utilizing many of our modern 'obfuscate the important things' and 'create the myth the people want to hear' campaign strategies.

Virginia, which, in 1840, included West Virginia, did vote for Van Buren, but Harrison was more able to convince voters ranging from high-powered bankers to poor western settlers that he was the better choice for the country. He won both the Electoral College and popular vote, although it was much closer in the popular vote than predicted- Harrison won only by 146,000 votes, out of 2.4 million cast. So the citizens of the US remained quite divided over the large issues of the day, such as a national bank and slavery.

So where does this leave us with Wiley Anderson Murrell and the Democratic 'Committee of Vigilance'? Going into the 1840s and with a change in the national political power, it was important that the Democrats have some control in Botetourt County. Law enforcement concerning runaway slaves, debts unpaid to a bank, etc. would have been influenced by the local party in control, possibly even after the Presidential election. Although Van Buren won Botetourt County 50.65% to Harrison's 49.35%, we do not know what changes may have happened after Harrison took office. Having the Democratic Committee of Vigilance in place may have made a difference in how the county was run. (We should check on whether or not there was a Whig Committee of Vigilance.)

It has been exciting to finally find Wiley A. Murrell's name in the newspaper after so many years of searching, and it would be wonderful to maybe find more about his time with this committee or in Virginia. Having James A. Murrell listed also gives us a clue that he might have had a brother, cousin, or uncle or father living in the area in 1840- that too may open some research doors. And of course, it is always interesting to place our ancestors in the context of their times!

Notes, Sources, and References:

1. "Committee of Vigilance," *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 March 1840, Botetourt County, Vol. 36, No. 102, Page 4, Col. 2, via VirginiaChronicle.com.
2. Virginia County maps by year: <http://www.mapofus.org/virginia/>
3. "United States presidential election, 1840" at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1840

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