

= Political career of John C. Breckinridge =

The political career of John C. Breckinridge included service in the state government of Kentucky , the United States federal government , and the government of the Confederate States of America . In 1857 , at 36 years old , he was inaugurated as James Buchanan 's vice president , and remains the youngest person to ever hold the office . Four years later , he ran as the presidential candidate of a dissident group of Southern Democrats , but lost the election to the Republican candidate , Abraham Lincoln .

A member of the Breckinridge political family , in 1849 John C. Breckinridge became the first Democrat to represent Fayette County in the Kentucky House of Representatives , and in 1851 , he was the first Democrat to represent Kentucky 's 8th congressional district in over 20 years . A champion of strict constructionism , states ' rights , and popular sovereignty , he supported Stephen A. Douglas 's Kansas ? Nebraska Act as a means of addressing slavery in the territories acquired by the U.S. in the Mexican ? American War . Considering his re @-@ election to the House of Representatives unlikely in 1854 , he returned to private life and his legal practice . He was nominated for vice president at the 1856 Democratic National Convention , and although he and Buchanan won the election , he enjoyed little influence in Buchanan 's administration .

In 1859 , the Kentucky General Assembly elected Breckinridge to a U.S. Senate term that would begin in 1861 . In the 1860 presidential contest , he captured the electoral votes of most of the Southern states , but finished a distant second among four candidates . Lincoln 's election as president prompted the secession of the Southern states to form the Confederate States of America . Though Breckinridge sympathized with the Southern cause , in the Senate he worked futilely to reunite the states peacefully . After the Confederates fired on Fort Sumter , beginning the Civil War , he opposed allocating resources for Lincoln to fight the Confederacy . Fearing arrest after Kentucky sided with the Union , he fled to the Confederacy , joined the Confederate States Army , and was subsequently expelled from the Senate . He served in the Confederate Army from October 1861 to February 1865 , when Confederate President Jefferson Davis appointed him Confederate States Secretary of War . Concluding that the Confederate cause was hopeless , he encouraged Davis to negotiate a national surrender . Davis 's capture in April , 1865 ended the war , and Breckinridge fled to Cuba , then Great Britain , and finally Canada , remaining in exile until President Andrew Johnson 's offer of amnesty in 1868 . Returning to Kentucky , he refused all requests to resume his political career and died of complications related to war injuries in 1875 .

= = Formative years = =

Historian James C. Klotter has speculated that , had John C. Breckinridge 's father , Cabell , lived , he would have steered his son to the Whig Party and the Union , rather than the Democratic Party and the Confederacy , but the Kentucky Secretary of State and former Speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives died of a fever on September 1 , 1823 , months before his son 's third birthday . Burdened with her husband 's debts , widow Mary Breckinridge and her children moved to her in @-@ laws ' home near Lexington , Kentucky , where John C. Breckinridge 's grandmother taught him the political philosophies of his late grandfather , U.S. Attorney General John Breckinridge . John Breckinridge believed the federal government was created by , and subject to , the co @-@ equal governments of the states . As a state representative , he introduced the Kentucky Resolutions of 1798 and 1799 , which denounced the Alien and Sedition Acts and asserted that states could nullify them and other federal laws that they deemed unconstitutional . A strict constructionist , he held that the federal government could only exercise powers explicitly given to it in the Constitution .

Most of the Breckinridges were Whigs , but John Breckinridge 's posthumous influence inclined his grandson toward the Democratic Party . Additionally , John C. Breckinridge 's friend and law partner , Thomas W. Bullock , was from a Democratic family . In 1842 , Bullock told Breckinridge that by the time they opened their practice in Burlington , Iowa , " you were two @-@ thirds of a Democrat " ; living in heavily Democratic Iowa Territory further distanced him from Whiggery . He wrote weekly

editorials in the Democratic Iowa Territorial Gazette and Advisor , and in February 1843 , he was named to the Des Moines County Democratic committee . A letter from Breckinridge 's brother @-@ in @-@ law related that , when Breckinridge 's uncle William learned that his nephew had " become loco @-@ foco " , he said , " I felt as I would have done if I had heard that my daughter had been dishonored . " On a visit to Kentucky in 1843 , Breckinridge met and married Mary Cyrene Burch , ending his time in Iowa .

= = Views on slavery = =

Slavery issues dominated Breckinridge 's political career , although historians disagree about Breckinridge 's views . In Breckinridge : Statesman , Soldier , Symbol , William C. Davis argues that , by adulthood , Breckinridge regarded slavery as evil ; his entry in the 2002 Encyclopedia of World Biography records that he advocated voluntary emancipation . In Proud Kentuckian : John C. Breckinridge 1821 ? 1875 , Frank Heck disagrees , citing Breckinridge 's consistent advocacy for slavery protections , beginning with his opposition to emancipationist candidates ? including his uncle , Robert Jefferson Breckinridge ? in the state elections of 1849 .

= = = Early influences = = =

See also John C. Breckinridge : Early life

Breckinridge 's grandfather , John , owned slaves , believing it was a necessary evil in an agrarian economy . He hoped for gradual emancipation but did not believe the federal government was empowered to effect it ; Davis wrote that this became " family doctrine " . As a U.S. Senator , John Breckinridge insisted that decisions about slavery in Louisiana Territory be left to its future inhabitants , essentially the " popular sovereignty " advocated by John C. Breckinridge prior to the Civil War . John C. Breckinridge 's father , Cabell , embraced gradual emancipation and opposed government interference with slavery , but Cabell 's brother Robert , a Presbyterian minister , became an abolitionist , concluding that slavery was morally wrong . Davis recorded that all the Breckinridges were pleased when the General Assembly refused to repeal the ban on importing slaves to Kentucky in 1833 .

John C. Breckinridge encountered conflicting influences as an undergraduate at Centre College and in law school at Transylvania University . Centre President John C. Young , Breckinridge 's brother @-@ in @-@ law , believed in states ' rights and gradual emancipation , as did George Robertson , one of Breckinridge 's instructors at Transylvania , but James G. Birney , father of Breckinridge 's friend and Centre classmate William Birney , was an abolitionist . In an 1841 letter to Robert Breckinridge , who became his surrogate father after Cabell Breckinridge 's death , John C. Breckinridge wrote that only " ignorant , foolish men " feared abolition . In an Independence Day address in Frankfort later that year , he decried the " unlawful dominion over the bodies ... of men " . An acquaintance believed that Breckinridge 's move to Iowa Territory was motivated , in part , by the fact that it was a free territory under the Missouri Compromise .

After returning to Kentucky , Breckinridge became friends with abolitionists Cassius Marcellus Clay , Garrett Davis , and Orville H. Browning . He represented freedmen in court and loaned them money . He was a Freemason and member of the First Presbyterian Church , both of which opposed slavery . Nevertheless , because blacks were educationally and socially disadvantaged in the South , Breckinridge concluded that " the interests of both races in the Commonwealth would be promoted by the continuance of their present relations " . He supported the new state constitution adopted in 1850 , which forbade the immigration of freedmen to Kentucky and required emancipated slaves to be expelled from the state . Believing it was best to relocate freedmen to the African colony of Liberia , he supported the Kentucky branch of the American Colonization Society . The 1850 Census showed that Breckinridge owned five slaves , aged 11 to 36 . Heck recorded that his slaves were well @-@ treated but noted that this was not unusual and proved nothing about his views on slavery .

= = = Moderate reputation = = =

Because Breckinridge defended both the Union and slavery in the General Assembly , he was considered a moderate early in his political career . In June 1864 , Pennsylvania 's John W. Forney opined that Breckinridge had been " in no sense an extremist " when elected to Congress in 1851 . Of his early encounters with Breckinridge , Forney wrote : " If he had a conscientious feeling , it was hatred of slavery , and both of us , ' Democrats ' as we were , frequently confessed that it was a sinful and an anti @-@ Democratic institution , and that the day would come when it must be peaceably or forcibly removed . " Heck discounts this statement , pointing out that Forney was editor of a pro @-@ Union newspaper and Breckinridge a Confederate general at the time it was published . As late as the 1856 presidential election , some alleged that Breckinridge was an abolitionist .

By the time he began his political career , Breckinridge had concluded that slavery was more a constitutional issue than a moral one . Slaves were property , and the Constitution did not empower the federal government to interfere with property rights . From Breckinridge 's constructionist viewpoint , allowing Congress to legislate emancipation without constitutional sanction would lead to " unlimited dominion over the territories , excluding the people of the slave states from emigrating thither with their property " . As a private citizen , he supported the slavery protections in the Kentucky Constitution of 1850 and denounced the Wilmot Proviso , which would have forbidden slavery in territory acquired in the Mexican ? American War . As a state legislator , he declared slavery a " wholly local and domestic " matter , to be decided separately by the residents of each state and territory . Because Washington , D.C. , was a federal entity and the federal government could not interfere with property rights , he concluded that forced emancipation there was unconstitutional . As a congressman , he insisted on Congress 's " perfect non @-@ intervention " with slavery in the territories . Debating the 1854 Kansas ? Nebraska Act , he explained , " The right to establish [slavery in a territory by government sanction] involves the correlative right to prohibit ; and , denying both , I would vote for neither . "

= = = Later views = = =

Davis notes that Breckinridge 's December 21 , 1859 , address to the state legislature marked a change in his public statements about slavery . He decried the Republicans ' desire for " negro equality " , his first public indication that he may have believed blacks were biologically inferior to whites . He declared that the Dred Scott decision showed that federal courts afforded adequate protection for slave property , but advocated a federal slave code if future courts failed to enforce those protections ; this marked a departure from his previous doctrine of " perfect non @-@ interference " . Asserting that John Brown 's raid on Harpers Ferry proved Republicans intended to force abolition on the South , he predicted " resistance [to the Republican agenda] in some form is inevitable " . He still urged the Assembly against secession ? " God forbid that the step shall ever be taken ! " ? but his discussion of growing sectional conflict bothered some , including his uncle Robert .

Klotter wrote that Breckinridge 's sale of a female slave and her six @-@ week @-@ old child in November 1857 probably ended his days as a slaveholder . Slaves were not listed among his assets in the 1860 Census , but Heck noted that he had little need for slaves at that time , since he was living in Lexington 's Phoenix Hotel after returning to Kentucky from his term as vice president . Some slavery advocates refused to support him in the 1860 presidential race because he was not a slaveholder . Klotter noted that Breckinridge fared better in rural areas of the South , where there were fewer slaveholders ; in urban areas where the slave population was higher , he lost to Constitutional Unionist candidate John Bell , who owned 166 slaves . William C. Davis recorded that , in most of the South , the combined votes for Bell and Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas exceeded those cast for Breckinridge .

After losing the election to Abraham Lincoln , Breckinridge worked for adoption of the Crittenden Compromise ? authored by fellow Kentuckian John J. Crittenden ? as a means of preserving the

Union . Breckinridge believed the Crittenden proposal ? restoring the Missouri Compromise line as the separator between slave and free territory in exchange for stricter enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and federal non @-@ interference with slavery in the territories and Washington , D.C. ? was the most extreme proposal to which the South would agree . Ultimately , the compromise was rejected and the Civil War soon followed .

= = Early political career = =

A supporter of the annexation of Texas and " manifest destiny " , Breckinridge campaigned for James K. Polk in the 1844 presidential election , prompting a relative to observe that he was " making himself very conspicuous here by making flaming loco foco speeches at the Barbecues " . He decided against running for Scott County clerk after his law partner complained that he spent too much time in politics . In 1845 , he declined to seek election to the U.S. House of Representatives from the Eighth District but campaigned for Alexander Keith Marshall , his party 's unsuccessful nominee . He supported Zachary Taylor for the presidency in mid @-@ 1847 but endorsed the Democratic ticket of Lewis Cass and William O. Butler after Taylor became a Whig in 1848 .

= = = Kentucky House of Representatives = = =

In October 1849 , Kentucky voters called for a constitutional convention . Emancipationists , including Breckinridge 's uncles William and Robert , his brother @-@ in @-@ law John C. Young , and his friend Cassius Marcellus Clay , nominated " friends of emancipation " to seek election to the convention and the state legislature In response , Breckinridge , who opposed " impairing [slavery protections] in any form " , was nominated by a bipartisan pro @-@ slavery convention for one of Fayette County 's two seats in the Kentucky House of Representatives . With 1 @,@ 481 votes , 400 more than any of his opponents , Breckinridge became the first Democrat elected to the state legislature from Fayette County , which was heavily Whig .

When the House convened in December 1849 , a member from Mercer County nominated Breckinridge for Speaker against two Whigs . After receiving 39 votes ? 8 short of a majority ? on the first three ballots , he withdrew , and the position went to Whig Thomas Reilly . Assigned to the committees on the Judiciary and Federal Relations , Breckinridge functioned as the Democratic floor leader during the session . Davis wrote that his most important work during the session was bank reform .

Breckinridge 's first speech favored allowing the Kentucky Colonization Society to use the House chamber ; later , he advocated directing Congress to establish an African freedmen colony , and to meet the costs of transporting settlers there . Funding internal improvements was traditionally a Whig stance , but Breckinridge advocated conducting a state geologic survey , making the Kentucky River more navigable , chartering a turnpike , incorporating a steamboat company , and funding the Kentucky Lunatic Asylum . As a reward for supporting these projects , he presided over the approval of the Louisville and Bowling Green Railroad 's charter and was appointed director of the asylum .

Resolutions outlining Kentucky 's views on the proposed Compromise of 1850 were referred to the Committee on Federal Relations . The committee 's Whig majority favored one calling the compromise a " fair , equitable , and just basis " for dealing with slavery in the territories and urging Congress not to interfere with slavery there or in Washington , D.C. Feeling this left open the issue of Congress 's ability to legislate emancipation , Breckinridge asserted in a competing resolution that Congress could not establish or abolish slavery in states or territories . Both resolutions , and several passed by the state Senate , were laid on the table without being adopted .

Breckinridge left the session on March 4 , 1850 , three days before its adjournment , to tend to John Milton Breckinridge , his infant son who had fallen ill ; he died on March 18 . To distract from his grief , he campaigned for ratification of the new constitution , objecting only to its difficult amendment process . He declined renomination , citing concerns " of a private and imperative nature " . Davis wrote that the problem was money , since his absence from Lexington had hurt his legal practice , but his son 's death was also a factor .

= = U.S. House of Representatives = =

At an October 17 , 1850 , barbecue celebrating the Compromise of 1850 , Breckinridge toasted its author , Whig Party founder Henry Clay . Clay reciprocated by praising Breckinridge 's grandfather and father , expressing hope that Breckinridge would use his talents to serve his country , then embracing him . Some observers believed that Clay was endorsing Breckinridge for higher office , and Whig newspapers began referring to him as " a sort of half @-@ way Whig " and implying that he voted for Taylor in 1848 .

= = = First term (1851 ? 1853) = = =

Delegates to the Democrats ' January 1851 state convention nominated Breckinridge to represent Kentucky 's Eighth District in the U.S. House of Representatives . Called the " Ashland district " because it contained Clay 's Ashland estate and much of the area he once represented , Whigs typically won there by 600 to 1 @,@ 000 votes . A Democrat had not represented it since 1828 , and in the previous election no Democrat had sought the office . Breckinridge 's opponent , Leslie Combs , was a popular War of 1812 veteran and former state legislator . As they campaigned together , Breckinridge 's eloquence contrasted with Combs ' plainspoken style . Holding that " free thought needed free trade " , Breckinridge opposed Whig protective tariffs . He only favored federal funding of internal improvements " of a national character " . Carrying only three of seven counties , but bolstered by a two @-@ to @-@ one margin in Owen County , Breckinridge garnered 54 % of the vote , winning the election by a margin of 537 .

Considered for Speaker of the House , Breckinridge believed his election unlikely and refused to run against fellow Kentuckian Linn Boyd . Boyd was elected , and despite Breckinridge 's gesture , assigned him to the lightly @-@ regarded Foreign Affairs Committee . Breckinridge resisted United States Democratic Review editor George Nicholas Sanders ' efforts to recruit him to the Young America movement . Like Young Americans , Breckinridge favored westward expansion and free trade , but he disagreed with the movement 's support of European revolutions and its disdain for older statesmen . On March 4 , 1852 , Breckinridge made his first speech in the House , defending presidential aspirant William Butler against charges by Florida 's Edward Carrington Cabell , a Young American and distant cousin , that Butler secretly sympathized with the Free Soilers . He denounced Sanders for his vitriolic attacks on Butler and for calling all likely Democratic presidential candidates except Stephen Douglas " old fogies " .

The speech made Breckinridge a target of Whigs , Young Americans , and Douglas supporters . Humphrey Marshall , a Kentucky Whig who supported incumbent President Millard Fillmore , attacked Breckinridge for claiming Fillmore had not fully disclosed his views on slavery . Illinois ' William Alexander Richardson , a Douglas backer , tried to distance Douglas from Sanders ' attacks on Butler , but Breckinridge showed that Douglas endorsed the Democratic Review a month after it printed its first anti @-@ Butler article . Finally , Breckinridge 's cousin , California 's Edward C. Marshall , charged that Butler would name Breckinridge Attorney General in exchange for his support and revived the charge that Breckinridge broke party ranks , supporting Zachary Taylor for president . Breckinridge ably defended himself , but Sanders continued to attack him and Butler , claiming Butler would name Breckinridge as his running mate , even though Breckinridge was too young to qualify as vice president .

After his maiden speech , Breckinridge took a more active role in the House . In debate with Ohio 's Joshua Reed Giddings , he defended the Fugitive Slave Law 's constitutionality and criticized Giddings for hindering the return of fugitive slaves . He opposed Tennessee Congressman Andrew Johnson 's Homestead Bill , fearing it would create more territories that excluded slavery . Although generally opposed to funding local improvements , he supported the repair of two Potomac River bridges to avoid higher costs later . Other minor stands included supporting measures to benefit his district 's hemp farmers , voting against giving the president ten more appointments to the U.S. Naval Academy , and opposing funds for a sculpture of George Washington because the sculptor

proposed depicting Washington in a toga .

Beginning in April , Breckinridge made daily visits to an ailing Henry Clay . Clay died June 29 , 1852 , and Breckinridge garnered nationwide praise and enhanced popularity in Kentucky after eulogizing Clay in the House . Days later , he spoke in opposition to increasing a subsidy to the Collins Line for carrying trans @-@ Atlantic mail , noting that Collins profited by carrying passengers and cargo on mail ships . In wartime , the government could commandeer and retrofit Collins 's steamboats as warships , but Breckinridge cited Commodore Matthew C. Perry 's opinion that they would be useless in war . Finally , he showed Cornelius Vanderbilt 's written statement promising to build a fleet of mail ships at his expense and carry the mail for \$ 4 million less than Collins . Despite this , the House approved the subsidy increase .

= = = Second term (1853 ? 1855) = = =

With Butler 's chances for the presidential nomination waning , Breckinridge convinced the Kentucky delegation to the 1852 Democratic National Convention not to nominate Butler until later balloting when he might become a compromise candidate . He urged restraint when Lewis Cass 's support dropped sharply on the twentieth ballot , but Kentucky 's delegates would wait no longer ; on the next ballot , they nominated Butler , but he failed to gain support . After Franklin Pierce , Breckinridge 's second choice , was nominated , Breckinridge tried , unsuccessfully , to recruit Douglas to Pierce 's cause . Pierce lost by 3 @, @ 200 votes in Kentucky ? one of four states won by Winfield Scott ? but was elected to the presidency , and appointed Breckinridge governor of Washington Territory in recognition of his efforts . Unsure of his re @-@ election chances in Kentucky , Breckinridge had sought the appointment , but after John J. Crittenden , rumored to be his challenger , was elected to the Senate in 1853 , he decided to decline it and run for re @-@ election .

= = = = Election = = = =

The Whigs chose Attorney General James Harlan to oppose Breckinridge , but he withdrew in March when some party factions opposed him . Robert P. Letcher , a former governor who had not lost in 14 elections , was the Whigs ' second choice . Letcher was an able campaigner who combined oratory and anecdotes to entertain and energize an audience . Breckinridge focused on issues in their first debate , comparing the Whig Tariff of 1842 to the Democrats ' lower Walker tariff , which increased trade and yielded more tax revenue . Instead of answering Breckinridge 's points , Letcher appealed to party loyalty , claiming Breckinridge would misrepresent the district " because he is a Democrat " . Letcher appealed to Whigs " to protect the grave of Mr. [Henry] Clay from the impious tread of Democracy " , but Breckinridge pointed to his friendly relations with Clay , remarking that Clay 's will did not mandate that " his ashes be exhumed " and " thrown into the scale to influence the result of the present Congressional contest " .

Cassius Clay , Letcher 's political enemy , backed Breckinridge despite their differences on slavery . Citing Clay 's support and the abolitionism of Breckinridge 's uncle Robert , Letcher charged that Breckinridge was an abolitionist . In answer , Breckinridge quoted newspaper accounts and sworn testimony , provided by John L. Robinson , of a speech Letcher made in Indiana for Zachary Taylor in 1848 . In the speech , made alongside Thomas Metcalfe , another former Whig governor of Kentucky , Letcher predicted that the Kentucky Constitution then being drafted would provide for gradual emancipation , declaring , " It is only the ultra men in the extreme South who desire the extension of slavery . "

When Letcher confessed doubts about his election chances , Whigs began fundraising outside the district , using the money to buy votes or pay Breckinridge supporters not to vote . Breckinridge estimated that the donations , which came from as far away as New York and included contributions from the Collins Line , totaled \$ 30 @, @ 000 ; Whig George Robertson believed it closer to \$ 100 @, @ 000 . Washington , D.C. , banker William Wilson Corcoran contributed \$ 1 @, @ 000 to Breckinridge , who raised a few thousand dollars . Out of 12 @, @ 538 votes cast , Breckinridge won

by 526 . He received 71 % of the vote in Owen County , which recorded 123 more votes than registered voters . Grateful for the county 's support , he nicknamed his son , John Witherspoon Breckinridge , " Owen " .

= = = = Service = = = =

Of 234 representatives in the House , Breckinridge was one of 80 re @-@ elected to the Thirty @-@ third Congress . His relative seniority , and Pierce 's election , increased his influence . He was rumored to have Pierce 's backing for Speaker of the House , but he again deferred to Boyd ; Maryland 's Augustus R. Sollers spoiled Boyd 's unanimous election by voting for Breckinridge . Still not given a committee chairmanship , he was assigned to the Ways and Means Committee , where he secured passage of a bill to cover overspending in fiscal year 1853 ? 1854 ; it was the only time in his career that he solely managed a bill . His attempts to increase Kentucky 's allocation in a rivers and harbors bill were unsuccessful but popular with his Whig constituents .

In January 1854 , Douglas introduced the Kansas ? Nebraska Act to organize the Nebraska Territory . Southerners had thwarted his previous attempts to organize the territory because Nebraska lay north of parallel 36 ° 30 ' north , the line separating slave and free territory under the Missouri Compromise . They feared that the territory would be organized into new free states that would vote against the South on slavery issues . The Kansas ? Nebraska Act allowed the territory 's settlers to decide whether or not to permit slavery , an implicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise . Kentucky Senator Archibald Dixon 's amendment to make the repeal explicit angered northern Democrats , but Breckinridge believed it would move the slavery issue from national to local politics , and he urged Pierce to support it . Breckinridge wrote to his uncle Robert that he " had more to do than any man here , in putting [the Act] in its present shape " , but Heck notes that few extant records support this claim . The repeal amendment made the act more palatable to the South ; only 9 of 58 Southern congressmen voted against it . No Northern Whigs voted for the measure , but 44 of 86 Northern Democrats voted in the affirmative , enough to pass it . The Senate quickly concurred , and Pierce signed the act into law on May 30 , 1854 .

During the debate on the bill , New York 's Francis B. Cutting demanded that Breckinridge retract or explain a statement he had made , which Breckinridge understood as a challenge to duel . Under the code duello , the challenged party selected the weapons and the distance between combatants ; Breckinridge chose rifles at 60 paces and suggested the duel be held in Silver Spring , Maryland , on his friend , Francis Preston Blair 's estate . Cutting had not meant his remark as a challenge , but insisted that he was now challenged and selected pistols at 10 paces . While their representatives tried to clarify matters , Breckinridge and Cutting made amends , averting the duel . Had it taken place , Breckinridge could have been removed from the House ; the 1850 Kentucky Constitution prevented duelists from holding office .

In the second session of the 33rd Congress , Breckinridge acted as spokesman for Ways and Means Committee bills , including a bill to assume and pay the debts Texas incurred prior to its annexation . Breckinridge 's friends , W. W. Corcoran and Jesse D. Bright , were two of Texas 's major creditors . The bill , which was approved , paid only those debts related to powers Texas surrendered to Congress upon annexation . Breckinridge was disappointed that the House defeated a measure to pay the Sioux \$ 12 @,@ 000 owed them for the 1839 purchase of an island in the Mississippi River ; the debt was never paid . Another increase in the subsidy to the Collins Line passed over his opposition , but Pierce vetoed it .

= = = Retirement from the House = = =

In February 1854 , the General Assembly 's Whig majority gerrymandered the Eighth District , removing over 500 Democratic voters and replacing them with several hundred Whig voters by removing Owen and Jessamine counties from the district and adding Harrison and Nicholas counties to it . The cooperation of the Know Nothing Party ? a relatively new nativist political entity ? with the faltering Whigs further hindered Breckinridge 's re @-@ election chances . With his family

again in financial straits , his wife wanted him to retire from national politics .

Pierre Soulé , the U.S. Minister to Spain , resigned in December 1854 after being unable to negotiate the annexation of Cuba and angering the Spanish by drafting the Ostend Manifesto , which called for the U.S. to take Cuba by force . Pierce nominated Breckinridge to fill the vacancy , but did not tell him until just before the Senate 's January 16 confirmation vote . After consulting Secretary of State William L. Marcy , Breckinridge concluded that the salary was insufficient and Soulé had so damaged Spanish relations that he would be unable to accomplish anything significant . In a February 8 , 1855 , letter to Pierce , he cited reasons " of a private and domestic nature " for declining the nomination . On March 17 , 1855 , he announced he would retire from the House .

Breckinridge and Minnesota Territory 's Henry Mower Rice were among the speculators who invested in land near present @-@ day Superior , Wisconsin . Rice disliked Minnesota 's territorial governor , Willis A. Gorman , and petitioned Pierce to replace him with Breckinridge . Pierce twice investigated Gorman , but found no grounds to remove him from office . Breckinridge fell ill when traveling to view his investments in mid @-@ 1855 and was unable to campaign in the state elections . Know Nothings captured every state office and six congressional districts ? including the Eighth District ? and Breckinridge sent regrets to friends in Washington , D.C. , promising to take a more active role in the 1856 campaigns .

= = U.S. vice president = =

Two Kentuckians ? Breckinridge 's friend , Governor Lazarus W. Powell and his enemy , Linn Boyd ? were potential Democratic presidential nominees in 1856 . Breckinridge ? a delegate to the national convention and designated as a presidential elector ? favored Pierce 's re @-@ election but convinced the state Democratic convention to leave the delegates free to support any candidate the party coalesced behind . To a New Yorker who proposed that Breckinridge 's nomination could unite the party , he replied " Humbug " .

= = = Election = = =

Pierce was unable to secure the nomination at the national convention , so Breckinridge switched his support to Stephen Douglas , but the combination of Pierce and Douglas supporters did not prevent James Buchanan 's nomination . After Douglas 's floor manager , William Richardson , suggested that nominating Breckinridge for vice president would help Buchanan secure the support of erstwhile Douglas backers in the general election , Louisiana 's J. L. Lewis nominated him . Breckinridge declined in deference to Linn Boyd but received 51 votes on the first ballot , behind Mississippi 's John A. Quitman with 59 , but ahead of third @-@ place Boyd , who garnered 33 . On the second ballot , Breckinridge received overwhelming support , and opposition delegates changed their votes to make his nomination unanimous .

The election was between Buchanan and Republican John C. Frémont in the north and between Buchanan and Millard Fillmore , nominated by a pro @-@ slavery faction of the Know Nothings , in the South . Tennessee Governor Andrew Johnson and Congressional Globe editor John C. Rives promoted the possibility that Douglas and Pierce supporters would back Fillmore in the Southern states , denying Buchanan a majority in the Electoral College and throwing the election to the House of Representatives . There , Buchanan 's opponents would prevent a vote , and the Senate 's choice for vice president ? certain to be Breckinridge ? would become president . There is no evidence that Breckinridge countenanced this scheme . Defying contemporary political convention , Breckinridge spoke frequently during the campaign , stressing Democratic fidelity to the constitution and charging that the Republican emancipationist agenda would tear the country apart . His appearances in the critical state of Pennsylvania helped allay Buchanan 's fears that Breckinridge desired to throw the election to the House . " Buck and Breck " won the election with 174 electoral votes to Frémont 's 114 and Fillmore 's 8 , and Democrats carried Kentucky for the first time since 1828 . Thirty @-@ six at the time of his inauguration on March 4 , 1857 , Breckinridge remains the youngest vice president in U.S. history .

= = = Service = = =

When Breckinridge asked to meet with Buchanan shortly after the inauguration , Buchanan told him to come to the White House and ask to see the hostess , Harriet Lane . Offended , Breckinridge refused to do so ; Buchanan 's friends later explained that asking to see Lane was a secret instruction to take a guest to the president . Buchanan apologized for the misunderstanding , but the event portended a poor relationship between the two men . Resentful of Breckinridge 's support for both Pierce and Douglas , Buchanan allowed him little influence in the administration . Breckinridge 's recommendation that former Whigs and Kentuckians ? Powell , in particular ? be included in Buchanan 's cabinet went unheeded . Kentuckians James B. Clay and Cassius M. Clay were offered diplomatic missions to Berlin and Peru , respectively , but both declined . Buchanan often asked Breckinridge to receive and entertain foreign dignitaries , but in 1858 , Breckinridge declined Buchanan 's request that he resign and take the again @-@ vacant position as U.S. Minister to Spain . The only private meeting between the two occurred near the end of Buchanan 's term , when the president summoned Breckinridge to get his advice on whether to issue a proclamation declaring a day of " Humiliation and Prayer " over the divided state of the nation ; Breckinridge affirmed that Buchanan should make the proclamation .

As vice president , Breckinridge was tasked with presiding over the debates of the Senate . In an early address to that body , he promised , " It shall be my constant aim , gentlemen of the Senate , to exhibit at all times , to every member of this body , the courtesy and impartiality which are due to the representatives of equal States . " Historian Lowell H. Harrison wrote that , while Breckinridge fulfilled his promise to the satisfaction of most , acting as moderator limited his participation in debate . Five tie @-@ breaking votes provided a means of expressing his views . Economic motivations explained two ? forcing an immediate vote on a codfishing tariff and limiting military pensions to \$ 50 per month (\$ 1367 @.@ 5 in present @-@ day currency) . A third cleared the floor for a vote on Douglas 's motion to admit Oregon to the Union , and a fourth defeated Johnson 's Homestead Bill . The final vote effected a wording change in a resolution forbidding constitutional amendments that empowered Congress to interfere with property rights . The Senate 's move from the Old Senate Chamber to a more spacious one on January 4 , 1859 , provided another opportunity . Afforded the chance to make the last address in the old chamber , Breckinridge encouraged compromise and unity among the states to resolve sectional conflicts .

Despite irregularities in the approval of the Lecompton Constitution by Kansas voters , Breckinridge agreed with Buchanan that it was legitimate , but he kept his position secret , and some believed he agreed with his friend , Stephen Douglas , that Lecompton was invalid . Breckinridge 's absence from the Senate during debate on admitting Kansas to the Union under Lecompton seemed to confirm this , but his leave ? to take his wife from Baton Rouge , Louisiana , where she was recovering from an illness , to Washington , D.C. ? had been planned for months . The death of his grandmother , Polly Breckinridge , prompted him to leave earlier than planned . During his absence , both houses of Congress voted to re @-@ submit the Lecompton Constitution to Kansas voters for approval . On resubmission , it was overwhelmingly rejected .

By January 1859 , friends knew Breckinridge desired the U.S. Senate seat of John J. Crittenden , whose term expired on March 3 , 1861 . The General Assembly would elect Crittenden 's successor in December 1859 , so Breckinridge 's election would not affect any presidential aspirations he might harbor . Democrats chose Breckinridge 's friend Beriah Magoffin over Linn Boyd as their gubernatorial nominee , bolstering Breckinridge 's chances for the senatorship , the presidency , or both . Boyd was expected to be Breckinridge 's chief opponent for the Senate , but he withdrew on November 28 , citing ill health , and died three weeks later . The Democratic majority in the General Assembly elected Breckinridge to succeed Crittenden by a vote of 81 to 53 over Joshua Fry Bell , who Magoffin had defeated for the governorship in August .

After Minnesota 's admission to the Union in May 1858 , opponents accused Breckinridge of rigging a random draw so that his friend , Henry Rice , would get the longer of the state 's two Senate terms . Senate Secretary Asbury Dickins blunted the charges , averring that he alone handled the

instruments used in the drawing . Republican Senator Solomon Foot closed a special session of the Thirty @-@ sixth Congress in March 1859 by offering a resolution praising Breckinridge for his impartiality ; after the session , the Republican @-@ leaning New York Times noted that while the star of the Buchanan administration " falls lower every hour in prestige and political consequence , the star of the Vice President rises higher " .

= = Presidential election of 1860 = =

Breckinridge 's lukewarm support for Douglas in his 1858 senatorial re @-@ election bid against Abraham Lincoln convinced Douglas that Breckinridge would seek the Democratic presidential nomination , but in a January 1860 letter to his uncle , Breckinridge averred he was " firmly resolved not to " . Douglas 's political enemies supported Breckinridge , and Buchanan reluctantly dispensed patronage to Breckinridge allies , further alienating Douglas . After Breckinridge left open the possibility of supporting a federal slave code in 1859 , Douglas wrote to Robert Toombs that he would support his enemy and fellow Georgian Alexander H. Stephens for the nomination over Breckinridge , although he would vote for Breckinridge over any Republican in the general election .

= = = Nomination = = =

Breckinridge asked James Clay to protect his interests at the 1860 Democratic National Convention in Charleston , South Carolina . Clay , Lazarus Powell , William Preston , Henry Cornelius Burnett , and James B. Beck desired to nominate Breckinridge for president , but in a compromise with Kentucky 's Douglas backers , the delegation went to Charleston committed to former Treasury Secretary James Guthrie of Louisville . Fifty Southern Democrats , upset at the convention 's refusal to include slavery protection in the party 's platform , walked out of the convention ; the remaining delegates decided that nominations required a two @-@ thirds majority of the original 303 delegates . For 35 ballots , Douglas ran well ahead of Guthrie but short of the needed majority . Arkansas 's lone remaining delegate nominated Breckinridge , but Beck asked that the nomination be withdrawn because Breckinridge refused to compete with Guthrie . Twenty @-@ one more ballots were cast , but the convention remained deadlocked . On May 3 , the convention adjourned until June 18 in Baltimore , Maryland .

Breckinridge 's communication with his supporters between the meetings indicated greater willingness to become a candidate , but he instructed Clay to nominate him only if his support exceeded Guthrie 's . Many believed that Buchanan supported Breckinridge , but Breckinridge wrote to Beck that " The President is not for me except as a last necessity , that is to say not until his help will not be worth a damn . " After a majority of the delegates , most of them Douglas supporters , voted to replace Alabama and Louisiana 's walk @-@ out delegates with new , pro @-@ Douglas men in Baltimore , Virginia 's delegation led another walk @-@ out of Southern Democrats and Buchanan @-@ controlled delegates from the northeast and Pacific coast ; 105 delegates , including 10 of Kentucky 's 24 , left , and the remainder nominated Douglas . The walk @-@ outs held a rival nominating convention , styled the National Democratic Convention , at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore . At that convention on June 23 , Massachusetts ' George B. Loring nominated Breckinridge for president , and he received 81 of the 105 votes cast , the remainder going to Daniel S. Dickinson of New York . Oregon 's Joseph Lane was nominated for vice @-@ president .

Breckinridge told Beck he would not accept the nomination because it would split the Democrats and ensure the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln . On June 25 , Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis proposed that Breckinridge should accept the nomination ; his strength in the South would convince Douglas that his own candidacy was futile . Breckinridge , Douglas , and Constitutional Unionist John Bell would withdraw , and Democrats could nominate a compromise candidate . Breckinridge accepted the nomination , but maintained that he had not sought it and that he had been nominated " against my expressed wishes " . Davis 's compromise plan failed when Douglas refused to withdraw , believing his supporters would vote for Lincoln rather than a compromise candidate .

= = = Election = = =

The election effectively pitted Lincoln against Douglas in the North and Breckinridge against Bell in the South . Far from expectant of victory , Breckinridge told Davis 's wife , Varina , " I trust I have the courage to lead a forlorn hope . " Caleb Cushing oversaw the publication of several Breckinridge campaign documents , including a campaign biography and copies of his speeches on the occasion of the Senate 's move to a new chamber and his election to the Senate . After making a few short speeches during stops between Washington , D.C. and Lexington , Breckinridge stated that , consistent with contemporary custom , he would make no more speeches until after the election , but the results of an August 1860 special election to replace the deceased clerk of the Kentucky Court of Appeals convinced him that his candidacy could be faltering . He had expressed confidence that the Democratic candidate for the clerkship would win , and " nothing short of a defeat by 6 @,@ 000 or 8 @,@ 000 would alarm me for November " . Constitutional Unionist Leslie Combs won by 23 @,@ 000 votes , prompting Breckinridge to make a full @-@ length campaign speech in Lexington on September 5 , 1860 .

Breckinridge 's three @-@ hour speech was primarily defensive ; his moderate tone was designed to win votes in the north but risked losing Southern support to Bell . He denied charges that he had supported Zachary Taylor over Lewis Cass in 1848 , that he had sided with abolitionists in 1849 , and that he had sought John Brown 's pardon for the Harpers Ferry raid . Reminding the audience that Douglas wanted the Supreme Court to decide the issue of slavery in the territories , he pointed out that Douglas then denounced the Dred Scott ruling and laid out a means for territorial legislatures to circumvent it . Breckinridge supported the legitimacy of secession but insisted it was not the solution to the country 's sectional disagreements . In answer to Douglas 's charge that there was not " a disunionist in America who is not a Breckinridge man " , he challenged the assembled crowd " to point out an act , to disclose an utterance , to reveal a thought of mine hostile to the constitution and union of the States " . He warned that Lincoln 's insistence on emancipation made him the real disunionist .

Breckinridge finished third in the popular vote with 849 @,@ 781 votes to Lincoln 's 1 @,@ 866 @,@ 452 , Douglas 's 1 @,@ 379 @,@ 957 , and Bell 's 588 @,@ 879 . He carried 12 of the 15 Southern states and the border states of Maryland , Delaware and North Carolina but lost his home state to Bell . His greatest support in the Deep South came from areas that opposed secession . Davis pointed out that only Breckinridge garnered nearly equal support from the Deep South , the border states , and the free states of the North . His 72 electoral votes bested Bell 's 59 and Douglas 's 12 , but Lincoln received 180 , enough to win the election .

= = = Aftermath = = =

Three weeks after the election , Breckinridge returned to Washington , D.C. , to preside over the Senate 's lame duck session . Lazarus Powell , now a senator , proposed a resolution creating a committee of thirteen members to respond to the portion of Buchanan 's address regarding the disturbed condition of the country . Breckinridge appointed the members of the committee which , in Heck 's opinion , formed " an able committee , representing every major faction " . John J. Crittenden proposed a compromise by which slavery would be forbidden in territories north of parallel 36 ° 30 ' north ? the demarcation line used in the Missouri Compromise ? and permitted south of it , but the committee 's five Republicans rejected the proposal . On December 31 , the committee reported that it could come to no agreement . Writing to Magoffin on January 6 , Breckinridge complained that the Republicans were " rejecting everything , proposing nothing " and " pursuing a policy which ... threatens to plunge the country into ... civil war " .

One of Breckinridge 's final acts as vice @-@ president was announcing the vote of the Electoral College to a joint session of Congress on February 13 , 1861 . Rumors abounded that he would tamper with the vote to prevent Lincoln 's election . Knowing that some legislators planned to attend the session armed , Breckinridge asked Winfield Scott to post guards in and around the chambers .

One legislator raised a point of order , requesting that the guards be ejected , but Breckinridge refused to sustain it ; the electoral vote proceeded , and Breckinridge announced Lincoln 's election as president . After Lincoln 's arrival in Washington , D.C. , on February 24 , Breckinridge visited him at the Willard Hotel . After making a valedictory address on March 4 , he swore in Hannibal Hamlin as his successor as vice president ; Hamlin then swore in Breckinridge and the other incoming senators .

= = U.S. Senate = =

Because Republicans controlled neither house of Congress , nor the Supreme Court , Breckinridge did not believe Lincoln 's election was a mandate for secession . Ignoring James Murray Mason 's contention that no Southerner should serve in Lincoln 's cabinet , Breckinridge supported the appointment of Virginian Montgomery Blair as Postmaster General . He also voted against a resolution to remove the names of the senators from seceded states from the Senate roll .

Working for a compromise that might yet save the Union , Breckinridge opposed a proposal by Ohio 's Clement Vallandigham that the border states unite to form a " middle confederacy " that would place a buffer between the U.S. and the seceded states , nor did Breckinridge desire to see Kentucky as the southernmost state in a northern confederacy ; its position south of the Ohio River left it too vulnerable to the southern confederacy should war occur . Urging that federal troops be withdrawn from the seceded states , he insisted " their presence can accomplish no good , but will certainly produce incalculable mischief " . He warned that , unless Republicans made some concessions , Kentucky and the other border states would also secede .

When the legislative session ended on March 28 , Breckinridge returned to Kentucky and addressed the state legislature on April 2 , 1861 . He urged the General Assembly to push for federal adoption of the Crittenden Compromise and advocated calling a border states convention which would draft a compromise proposal and submit it to the Northern and Southern states for adoption . Asserting that the states were coequal and free to choose their own course , he maintained that , if the border states convention failed , Kentucky should call a sovereignty convention and join the Confederacy as a last resort .

The Battle of Fort Sumter , which began the Civil War , occurred days later , before the border states convention could be held . Magoffin called a special legislative session on May 6 , and the legislature authorized creation of a six @-@ man commission to decide the state 's course in the war . Breckinridge , Magoffin , and Richard Hawes were the states ' rights delegates to the conference , while Crittenden , Archibald Dixon , and Samuel S. Nicholas represented the Unionist position . The delegates were only able to agree on a policy of armed neutrality , which Breckinridge believed impractical and ultimately untenable , but preferable to more drastic actions . In special elections held June 20 , 1861 , Unionists won 9 of Kentucky 's 10 House seats , and in the August 5 state elections , Unionists gained majorities in both houses of the state legislature .

When the Senate convened for a special session on July 4 , 1861 , Breckinridge stood almost alone in opposition to the war . Labeled a traitor , he was removed from the Committee on Military Affairs . He demanded to know what authority Lincoln had to blockade Southern ports or suspend the writ of habeas corpus . He reminded his fellow senators that Congress had not approved a declaration of war and maintained that Lincoln 's enlistment of men and expenditure of funds for the war effort were unconstitutional . If the Union could be persuaded not to attack the Confederacy , he predicted that " all those sentiments of common interest and feeling ... might lead to a political reunion founded upon consent " . On August 1 , he declared that if Kentucky supported Lincoln 's prosecution of the war , " she will be represented by some other man on the floor of this Senate . " Asked by Oregon 's Edward Dickinson Baker how he would handle the secession crisis , he responded , " I would prefer to see these States all reunited upon true constitutional principles to any other object that could be offered me in life ... But I infinitely prefer to see a peaceful separation of these States , than to see endless , aimless , devastating war , at the end of which I see the grave of public liberty and of personal freedom . "

In early September , Confederate and Union forces entered Kentucky , ending her neutrality . On

September 18 , Unionists shut down the pro @-@ Southern Louisville Courier newspaper and arrested former governor Charles S. Morehead , who was suspected of having Confederate sympathies . Learning that Colonel Thomas E. Bramlette was under orders to arrest him , Breckinridge fled to Prestonsburg , Kentucky , where he was joined by Confederate sympathizers George W. Johnson , George Baird Hodge , William E. Simms , and William Preston . The group continued to Abingdon , Virginia , where they took a train to Confederate @-@ held Bowling Green , Kentucky .

On October 2 , 1861 , the Kentucky General Assembly passed a resolution declaring that neither of the state 's U.S. Senators ? Breckinridge and Powell ? represented the will of the state 's citizens and requesting that both resign . Governor Magoffin refused to endorse the resolution , preventing its enforcement . Writing from Bowling Green on October 8 , Breckinridge declared , " I exchange with proud satisfaction a term of six years in the Senate of the United States for the musket of a soldier . " Later that month , he was part of a convention in Confederate @-@ controlled Russellville , Kentucky , that denounced the Unionist legislature as not representing the will of most Kentuckians and called for a sovereignty convention to be held in that city on November 18 . Breckinridge , George W. Johnson , and Humphrey Marshall were named to the planning committee , but Breckinridge did not attend the convention , which created a provisional Confederate government for Kentucky . On November 6 , Breckinridge was indicted for treason in a federal court in Frankfort . The Senate passed a resolution formally expelling him on December 2 , 1861 ; Powell was the only member to vote against the resolution , claiming that Breckinridge 's statement of October 8 amounted to a resignation , rendering the resolution unnecessary .

= = Confederate Secretary of War = =

Breckinridge served in the Confederate Army from November 2 , 1861 , until early 1865 . In mid @-@ January 1865 , Confederate President Jefferson Davis summoned Breckinridge to the Confederate capital at Richmond , Virginia , and rumors followed that Davis would appoint Breckinridge Confederate States Secretary of War , replacing James A. Seddon . Breckinridge arrived in Richmond on January 17 , and some time in the next two weeks , Davis offered him the appointment . Breckinridge made his acceptance conditional upon the removal of Lucius B. Northrop from his office as Confederate Commissary General . Most Confederate officers regarded Northrop as inept , but Davis had long defended him . Davis relented on January 30 , allowing Seddon to replace Northrop with Breckinridge 's friend , Eli Metcalfe Bruce , on an interim basis ; Breckinridge accepted Davis 's appointment the next day .

Some Confederate congressmen were believed to oppose Breckinridge because he had waited so long to join the Confederacy , but his nomination was confirmed unanimously on February 6 , 1865 . At 44 years old , he was the youngest person to serve in the Confederate president 's cabinet . Klotter called Breckinridge " perhaps the most effective of those who held that office " , but Harrison wrote that " no one could have done much with the War Department at that late date " . While his predecessors had largely served Davis 's interests , Breckinridge functioned independently , assigning officers , recommending promotions , and consulting on strategy with Confederate generals .

Breckinridge 's first act as secretary was to meet with assistant secretary John Archibald Campbell , who had opposed Breckinridge 's nomination , believing he would focus on a select few of the department 's bureaus and ignore the rest . During their conference , Campbell expressed his desire to retain his post , and Breckinridge agreed , delegating many of the day @-@ to @-@ day details of the department 's operation to him . Breckinridge recommended that Davis appoint Isaac M. St. John , head of the Confederate Nitre and Mining Bureau , as permanent commissary general . Davis made the appointment on February 15 , and the flow of supplies to Confederate armies improved under St. John . With Confederate ranks plagued by desertion , Breckinridge instituted a draft ; when this proved ineffective , he negotiated the resumption of prisoner exchanges with the Union in order to replenish the Confederates ' depleted manpower .

By late February , Breckinridge had concluded that the Confederate cause was hopeless . He

opposed the use of guerilla warfare by Confederate forces and urged a national surrender . Meeting with Confederate senators from Virginia , Kentucky , Missouri , and Texas , he urged , " This has been a magnificent epic . In God 's name let it not terminate in a farce . " In April , with Union forces approaching Richmond , Breckinridge organized the escape of the other cabinet officials to Danville , Virginia . Afterward , he ordered the burning of the bridges over the James River and ensured the destruction of buildings and supplies that might aid the enemy . During the surrender of the city , he helped preserve the Confederate government and military records housed there .

After a brief rendezvous with Robert E. Lee 's retreating forces at Farmville , Virginia , Breckinridge moved south to Greensboro , North Carolina , where he , Naval Secretary Stephen Mallory , and Postmaster General John Henninger Reagan joined Generals Joseph E. Johnston and P. G. T. Beauregard to urge surrender . Davis and Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin initially resisted , but eventually asked Major General William T. Sherman to parley . Johnston and Breckinridge negotiated terms with Sherman , but President Andrew Johnson (who had assumed the presidency on Lincoln 's assassination on April 15) rejected them as too generous . On Davis ' orders , Breckinridge told Johnston to meet Richard Taylor in Alabama , but Johnston , believing his men would refuse to fight any longer , surrendered to Sherman on similar terms to those offered to Lee at Appomattox .

After the failed negotiations , Confederate Attorney General George Davis and Confederate Treasury Secretary George Trenholm resigned . The rest of the Confederate cabinet ? escorted by over 2 @, @ 000 cavalymen under Basil W. Duke and Breckinridge 's nephew William Campbell Preston Breckinridge ? traveled southwest to meet Taylor at Mobile . Believing that the Confederate cause was not yet lost , Davis convened a council of war on May 2 in Abbeville , South Carolina , but the cavalry commanders told him that the only cause for which their men would fight was to aid Davis 's escape from the country . Informed that gold and silver coins and bullion from the Confederate treasury were at the train depot in Abbeville , Breckinridge ordered Duke to load it onto wagons and guard it as they continued southward . En route to Washington , Georgia , some members of the cabinet 's escort threatened to take their back salaries by force . Breckinridge had intended to wait until their arrival to make the payments , but to avoid mutiny , he dispersed some of the funds immediately . Two brigades deserted immediately after being paid ; the rest continued to Washington , where the remaining funds were deposited in a local bank .

Discharging most of the remaining escort , Breckinridge left Washington with a small party on May 5 , hoping to distract federal forces from the fleeing Confederate president . Between Washington and Woodstock , the party was overtaken by Union forces under Lieutenant Colonel Andrew K. Campbell ; Breckinridge ordered his nephew to surrender while he , his sons Cabell and Clifton , James B. Clay , Jr . , and a few others fled into the nearby woods . At Sandersville , he sent Clay and Clifton home , announcing that he and the rest of his companions would proceed to Madison , Florida . On May 11 , they reached Milltown , Georgia , where Breckinridge expected to rendezvous with Davis , but on May 14 , he learned of Davis 's capture days earlier .

= = Later life = =

Besides marking the end of the Confederacy and the war , Davis 's capture left Breckinridge as the highest @-@ ranking former Confederate still at large . Fearing arrest , he fled to Cuba , Great Britain , and Canada , where he lived in exile . Andrew Johnson issued a proclamation of amnesty for all former Confederates in December 1868 , and Breckinridge returned home the following March . Friends and government officials , including President Ulysses S. Grant , urged him to return to politics , but he declared himself " an extinct volcano " and never sought public office again . He died of complications from war @-@ related injuries on May 17 , 1875 .