War of 1812 began with close votes (Richmond Times-Dispatch) By Stuart L. Butler, Member of the War of 1812 Society in Virginia

On June 1, 1812, President James Madison sent the U.S. Congress his message summing up British warlike activities of the past six months. It was an indictment of Great Britain's adamant refusal to stop seizing American trading ships and seamen on the high seas. Although Madison did not expressly request a declaration of war, his words made clear his strong belief that the United States had no alternative but war to defend itself and its sovereignty.

For the next several weeks the Congress, often meeting in secret sessions, debated the issue. On June 4, 1812, the House of Representatives voted 79 to 49 to declare war against Great Britain. In the next two weeks, the U.S. Senate debated the House's bill and on June 17, by a vote of 19 to 13, passed the bill.

The president signed the bill into law on June 18, declaring war against Great Britain and its colonies. This was the first time the new nation had officially declared war. The vote in favor of this war would prove to be the closest such vote in American history.

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When the 12th U.S. Congress, often referred to as the War Congress, had convened seven months before, in November 1811, nearly half of its members were new. Many of these newcomers — such as Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun — were known as War Hawks, eager for war against Great Britain.

Supporters of the war came overwhelmingly from the majority Democratic-Republican Party, known as the Republicans. The party was particularly strong in the South and West, but it had members in every state. The minority, the Federalist party, was heavily concentrated in New England, though a few members resided in the South. In the vote for war, all Federalists opposed the war as did 17 Republicans.

A number of the congressmen from Virginia were among the opponents. In 1812, Virginia was the largest state with the largest congressional delegation, with 22 members, composed of 17 Republicans and five Federalists.

Virginia Federalists represented much of what is now West Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley and Northern Virginia. Daniel Sheffey, from the upper Valley district, vociferously opposed the war but was absent when the vote was taken. The other Federalists, John Baker, James Breckinridge, Joseph Lewis, Jr., and Thomas Wilson, voted not only against the war declaration but also against most of the war-related measures proposed during the war.

Of the Virginia Republicans, Matthew Clay and Edwin Gray, a follower of John Randolph, did not vote. John Randolph, nominally a Republican but preferring to call himself a Tertium Quid, or Old Republican, voted against the war. Randolph did everything he could to obstruct all measures supporting the war. Like the Federalists, he considered the war foolish, ruinous to the public credit, a dangerous increase in presidential powers and likely to end in defeat and humiliation.

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On the other hand, most of Virginia's other Republican representatives were convinced that the United States had legitimate reasons to go to war. However, some were reluctant at first to commit to war without determining if the country was prepared to accept the cost in lives, increased taxation and indebtedness. Among these was Hugh Nelson, son of Revolutionary War hero Thomas Nelson, who had to be persuaded that war was the right and only choice for the nation.

Others, including William Burwell, John Clopton, Thomas Gholson and Burwell Bassett, were at the outset willing to declare for war. Indeed, Bassett served as chairmen of the Naval Committee and vigorously supported build-