

Voting Viva Voce

UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS

The Election of May 26, 1859 in Alexandria, Virginia

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Public Voting

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by

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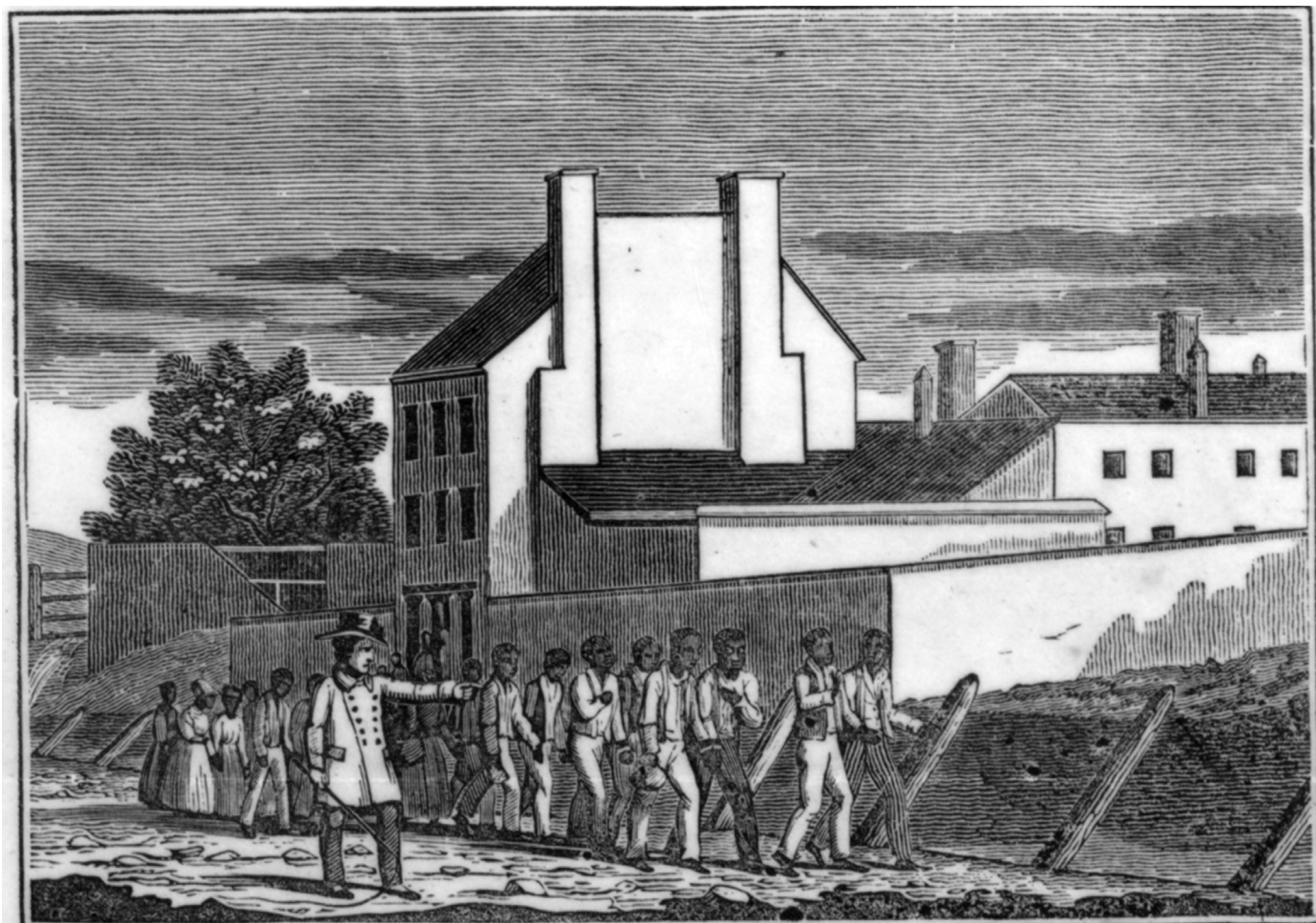
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Alexandria, a commercial town, consistently supported political parties proclaiming a strong commitment to improving infrastructure for trade and commerce. Not surprisingly, then, Alexandria was a reliably Whig town, voting for that party's candidates in every election from 1851 onward.

The city's interests rested comfortably in a competitive national party system between Whigs and Democrats, a system that emerged in the 1830s and structured national politics until the mid to late 1850s.

But that party system became problematic when the Whigs began to fracture in the mid-1850s, torn asunder by the question of allowing the expansion of slavery into the new territories (future states) of the American West. The newly formed Republican Party continued the Whig emphasis on support for development of infrastructure benefiting commerce, but joined this traditional Whig stance to a new platform of fervent hostility to the expansion of slavery in the West. The political problem for commercial Alexandria, which relied heavily on both commerce and Black labor (slave and free), quickly became acute.

Slavery was at the core of Alexandria's commerce: in the 1840s, when the town's commerce blossomed, Alexandria was one of the largest slave trading towns in the United States and slave trading continued as part of the city's commerce right up to the Civil War. In the final ante-bellum years, enslaved persons made up ten percent of the population and another eleven percent was defined in the federal Census as free Blacks. While only 5.5 percent of white adults owned slaves, but another 4.5 percent rented-in slave labor. If we count those who rented slaves we get a more accurate picture of the proportion of the city's adult white adult population (a highly influential 10 percent) that had a direct interest in the preservation of slavery. The centrality of slaveholders increased as one moved closer to political power: 21 percent of all voters in Alexandria owned or rented slaves.



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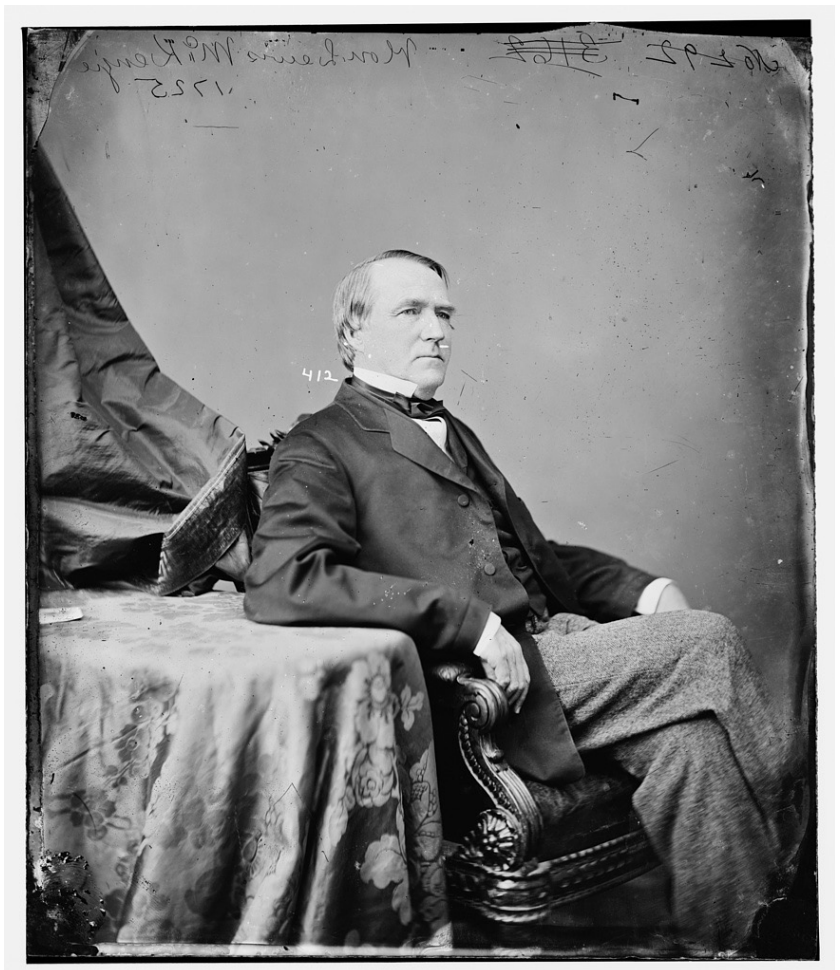
Franklin and Armfield Slave Prison, 1836. Franklin and Armfield was located in Alexandria, which at the time was part of the District of Columbia. The building depicted here is still standing today at 1315 Duke Street. This is a detailed image taken from an 1836 broadside published by the American Anti-Slavery Society illustrating the District of Columbia's vast involvement in the slave trade and calling for the abolition of slavery in the US capital. The movement to abolish slavery was widely supported by the Quakers and the message of this broadside would have resonated with the group's prominent Alexandrians, including Mordecai Miller and his son, Robert H Miller. Between 1825 and 1860 the Millers emancipated and affirmed the free status of at least 36 African-American men, women, and children.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Virginia. This would prove to be the last Congressional election in Alexandria before the firing on Ft. Sumter and the outbreak of the Civil War.

Weeks of sparring and sniping in the newspapers set the scene, as did the large public meetings where candidates spoke: at Sarepta Hall, Liberty Hall, Lyceum Hall, and the County Courthouse. As the election approached, partisans organized displays of political prowess in parades through the city streets [link to meeting notices and accounts to follow].

The polls opened at 6am on that Thursday and remained open until sundown, quite late on an early summer day. By all accounts the day was peaceful with 1406 white male city residents voting at one of the city's four city polling places: one in each ward. There were five Commissioners and one Conductor



Portrait of Lewis McKenzie, c 1860-1880. McKenzie was an Alexandria resident and Opposition Party candidate for the Virginia House of Delegates in the May 26, 1859 election

Courtesy of Library of Congress

of the Election at each polling place. Two of the polling places were held at familiar private places: Trammels Tavern, a rough venue which changed hands frequently, in a section of the 1st Ward known as “Fishtown” (for the largely Black fishmongers who sold their catch there). In the 4th Ward the election was held at a house, which frequently changed hands, on the northwest corner of Prince and Alfred Streets. William Davis, who was the “Conductor of the Election,” lived next to that house. He was 53, a well-to-do master carpenter, who was a member of Methodist Episcopal South church and voted, early in the day, for the full slate of Opposition candidates. The other two polls took place *outside* public buildings: the City Council Chambers (Ward 2) and County Courthouse (Ward 3).

Party loyalty was not overwhelming: 58 percent voted for the same party across all five contests but 26 percent “split their ticket,” voting for at least one candidate of the other side. Another 12 percent decided not to vote for one or more of the five offices. As in Bingham’s painting, *The Verdict of the People*, so in Alexandria the final result for the city and County were announced from the Courthouse steps.

The inelegantly titled “Opposition Party” won across the City and County in 1859. However it failed at the State level, and even in this formerly Whig town, the Democrats made gains. Half of all men who owned or rented slaves still voted the straight Opposition ticket. But the other half voted for at least one Democrat in the five offices to be filled and one in ten voted the straight Democratic ticket. Meanwhile Alexandria’s merchants and commission merchants, two-thirds of whom owned slaves, also tilted Democratic with only 43 percent voting the straight Opposition ticket. In the third ward, a more working class section of the city with no merchants or commission merchants, but still with many slave-owners, the Democrats were particularly strong and the Democratic gubernatorial slate carried the day. ■



The Verdict of the People, George Caleb Bingham, 1854–1855. This is the final painting in Bingham's Election Series, which documents the process of a viva voce election from stump speeches to reading of the results. The results of Alexandria's May 26, 1859 election were also read from the Courthouse steps, which was located at what is now the 300 block of North Columbus Street

George Caleb Bingham, American, 1811–1879; *The Verdict of the People*, 1854–55; oil on canvas; 346 x 55 in. (116.8 x 139.7 cm); Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Bank of America 45:2001

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Two mid-nineteenth century cities—Alexandria, Virginia and Newport, Kentucky—shared a common voting arrangement: both states required all votes in all elections to be cast in public by voice (viva voce). The poll books provided an official written record of every voter's spoken declaration. Professor Don DeBats presents and analyses this data on the website.

Public Voting. This project reveals the world of American politics at a time when every citizen's vote was public knowledge, and shows how social identity influenced votes.

Alexandria, Virginia | 1850s. On the Potomac just opposite Washington DC, Alexandria was a thriving commercial city based on slave labor in the late 1850's as the secession crisis loomed.

Newport, Kentucky | 1870. On the Ohio just opposite Cincinnati, Newport was, as the Panic of 1873 crashed down, a thriving industrial city based on immigrant labor.

Colophon

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