

# Voting Viva Voce

UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS



Philip Hamilton

DONALD A. DEBATS

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Profile

# Philip Hamilton

1810–1895

by  
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Philip Hamilton, 77 years old, may have wandered down to the polling place on May 26, 1859 to hear other men call out their electoral choices—but he didn’t line up to vote himself. Unlike other men of his age, other relatively affluent patriarchs, Philip was not permitted to vote. He was black and free, but not yet enfranchised. Alexandria had a large free black population; indeed slightly more free blacks (1399) than enslaved blacks (1182). Like his free black counterparts, Philip could only listen and watch the political proceedings. Voting rights for Virginia’s African-Americans were slow to come and fragile when they did. But Philip would have watched with close attention since he was personally acquainted with the family of one of the most important men in town—Robert H. Miller.

Philip and his wife Catherine lived in a house they owned on South Asaph St.—a block bounded on its other sides by South Washington, Gibbon, and Franklin Streets and consisting almost entirely of free black households: mostly renters but some other home owners. Across their back fence was Roberts Memorial (Methodist) Chapel, as it was then known. Philip was a founding member of the church which was a focal point for both the “Hayti” and “the Bottoms,” neighborhoods of free blacks and enslaved blacks living apart from their owners. Kinship strengthened the bonds within these neighborhoods.

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Cover and opposite

Philip Hamilton Gravestone, Trinity United Methodist Church Cemetery. As Davis Chapel did not have its own cemetery, Hamilton was buried at his former church’s cemetery. He is the only identified African American buried in the cemetery before the end of the Civil War. His stone reads: “Died April 16th 1862 in the 80th year of his age/Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” At the top of the stone is a common mid-1800s gravestone motif—a curtain over an open book, possibly a bible

Courtesy of Brian S. at Findagrave.com







Tax and census records present Philip and Catherine as a well-off couple who declared in the 1860 census an aggregate wealth of \$1820 and were assessed in 1859 by the city as holding a taxable wealth \$3655. This placed them in Alexandria's top wealth categories and Philip could lay claim to being the best-off free black in the city. The majority of whites with Philip's level of wealth owned or rented slaves.

Philip and Catherine had long been freed from slavery, as had other members of Philip's family. He was entitled to look back on his many years with pride. Still, prohibitions on education meant that neither Philip nor Catherine was able to read or write and both signed their names with an "x."

Although his status was "free," Philip and other free blacks lived with many restrictions of their rights. He was required to possess a "certificate of freedom" and to obtain a license from the town council permitting him to live within Alexandria municipal borders. He was listed in the County's Register of "Free Negroes" (volume 3, 1847-1861). Meetings of free blacks and mulattoes were prohibited, except for church services and other religious activities. They were not allowed to play cards, dice or any other games of chance, and could not buy spirits on Sundays. Philip and a very few others had thrived despite these restrictions, and it can only be imagined what he might have achieved had he been able to access the benefits of citizenship.

If Philip had been permitted to vote in 1859, his Unionist sympathies would probably have brought him to vote Opposition like many white men in his economic position, whether laborers like 57 year old William Price or business men such as the well-to-do among the city's grocers who supported the Opposition candidates by a margin of 60 to 40 percent.

Philip's wife Catherine Hamilton, also 77, lived with him, as did an 18-year-old Catherine Hamilton and 10- year-old Ben Hamilton, likely Catherine and Philips' grandchildren.

Catherine had been emancipated nearly forty years before, by her brother, William Roberts, who was already free and worked in manufacturing. Her landlord, Mordecai Miller, Robert H. Miller's father, had witnessed the signing on October 27, 1820. As Quakers, the Millers strongly supported the abolitionist cause and provided housing and aid to Alexandria's African-Americans. At the time Catherine was freed she paid Mordecai \$20 to

rent a house at 410 South Royal. Right next door, at 412 South Royal, lived William, the brother who had paid to free her.

Philip himself was freed some years after his wife, and during some of those years the couple probably lived separately. In the 1825 tax records he was still listed as a slave to Edward Pleasants and lived in Pleasants' house on Royal Street. Other records have Philip living in the home of Monica Bell in 1825 and enslaved to Colin Auld, who is listed in the County's 1847–1861 Free Negro Register as having freed Philip Hamilton.

But the Hamiltons' extended family members were not all free. Many of the slaves living along Royal St were related to Philip and Catherine and most were owned by the Herbert family. In 1824 and 1825 Catherine's own children, Prince and Ellen, remained slaves, owned by a Mrs. Herbert. In 1852 Arthur Herbert, Jr. co-founded the banking firm of Burke and Herbert and the family prospered even more, eventually owning a mansion, Muckcross, near the Episcopal Seminary. Herbert and Burke remains a significant financial institution in Virginia and in Alexandria.

Philip was an active member of the Roberts Memorial Methodist Church, located between the African-American neighborhoods known as "the Bottoms" and "Hayti". In 1830 a small group of men, both white and black, including Philip, founded a separate black congregation for the African-American members of Trinity Methodist Church, a predominately white church in Alexandria that had a substantial black congregation. The brick church was completed in 1834, having been delayed, and re-located, as a result of the white reaction to the Nat Turner slave rebellion in August, 1831. The church became a haven for Alexandria's African Americans.

Roberts Memorial Methodist Church did not have its own cemetery and in 1862 Philip was laid to rest in Trinity Cemetery, the graveyard of his original church. He is the only one of the original trustees for the African American church to be buried there and the only African-American known to have been interned in that cemetery before the end of the Civil War.

Philip never did have the opportunity to vote: he died eight years before the 15th Amendment, which enfranchised African American men, came into being. He willed a house (and also a cow) to his wife and descendants. That house, 410 South Royal, was the very same house his wife Catherine had rented from Mordecai Miller when her freedom papers were signed. ■



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### *Unlocking the Social Logic of Past Politics*

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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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