

Voting Viva Voce

UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS



Lewis McKenzie

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Profile

Lewis McKenzie

1810–1895

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For Governor... Goggin! ...For Lt Governor...Willey!
For Congress...Thomas! For Attorney General...Preston!...
For House of Delegates.....!

The Ward 1 polls opened early in the morning on Thursday, May 26, 1859 for the election of five state officials. As was usual in nineteenth century Virginia, all polling stations were set up out-of-doors, some at public places but others outside private homes and businesses. The First Ward polling station was outside the First Ward (public) House, a somewhat notorious saloon on Prince Street, between Union and Water, just a block from the Potomac. The other three city stations were at the Courthouse, the City Council Chambers, and, in Ward 4, outside Joseph Downey's grocery store (probably also selling alcohol) on the northwest corner of Prince and Alfred Street; the rural part of Alexandria County voted at Balls Cross-Road.

The Opposition candidate for Virginia's House of Delegates, local man-about-town Lewis McKenzie, was 7th of 354 men to vote. He was already an experienced political hand, having served on the City Council from 1855 until the local election in March of 1859. When McKenzie came forward at the May election to proclaim his candidate choices to the crowd gathered around, he called out for the full ticket of Opposition candidates. All, that is, except for one: House of Delegates. The candidate was Lewis McKenzie, and Lewis declined to call out his own name. One more vote—his own—may not have been worth a loss of dignity in front of friends, colleagues, fellow worshippers and neighbors.

Opposite

Lewis McKenzie, c1860-1880.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Lewis's older brother James, 57, who lived under the same roof as Lewis and worshiped in the same church, had no such scruples. James's Opposition ticket was complete down the line—and he declared himself publicly in front of all who wished to hear: Lewis McKenzie for House of Delegates. Lewis may have stayed at the poll; if so, he no doubt would have acknowledged, as was the custom, each declaration of support with a bow to the voter, perhaps even to his brother.

Candidate McKenzie was a staunch supporter of the Union cause, and of the North during the Civil War: unpopular views in Alexandria. Only two years later he would be installed as acting mayor following the Union occupation of the city: he was elected to the office in a special election in November, 1861 and served until 1863. Two years after that he would briefly serve as a Unionist in the 37th Congress after the unseating of the elected member, before returning to four more terms on the City Council and a full term in the 41st Congress. Locally he served as Postmaster for Alexandria.

In 1859 Lewis was just completing the first stage of his long political career. Forty-eight years old, and a second-generation Scot, Lewis was a fixture in Alexandria, place of his birth. Lewis's father, James, had been a sea captain from Rosshire who settled in this river port city.

Lewis became prominent in business from early adulthood but was even better known as a man who was active and effective in civic affairs. Railroads were his passion: he was president of the Alexandria and Harpers Ferry Railroad and the Alexandria, Loudoun, and Hampshire Railroad. Banking was his business, and he had been the first president of the Alexandria Savings Institute and in 1859 was on the Board of Directors of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank and the Potomac Insurance Company. But civic affairs were his life. He was a Trustee of the Female Orphan Asylum; as a Scot, he of course joined St Andrew's Society; and for fellowship, he was a member of the city's oldest Masonic lodge.

Opposite

522-524 King Street, c1965. Built in 1812, Lewis McKenzie rented the building from 1835 to 1843. Adam Lynn owned the building and continued renting it out to other Alexandrian business owners after McKenzie's occupancy. In 1883 Jewish German immigrant, Isaac Schwarz, purchased the property.
Courtesy of Library of Congress



Lewis was a member and elder of the First Presbyterian Meeting House: one of the three men who were crucial to any decision made by the church. Interestingly, neither of the other members of the triumvirate voted for him: one abstained for the House of Delegates vote, while the other came right out and declared himself in favor of Lewis's Democrat opponent.

Despite his energy and initiative Lewis was from far being the wealthiest man in the city, although he was in the top 20%. His taxable wealth in 1859 was \$12,700 and declared wealth \$6,700 in 1860. But in a city like Alexandria connections also mattered. There were many rich and influential men on his side of politics and Lewis was well extremely connected.

In 1860 Lewis shared his house on Prince St between Lee and Fairfax with his brother James, a bank clerk who wasn't particularly prosperous, and two of James's daughters Mary, 34 and Esther, 24. Esther held taxable assets of \$500.

James and Esther, like Lewis, were members of the First Presbyterian Church, but devotion seemed to be a matter of choice in the household: Mary was not a member of that—or perhaps any—church. After Lewis died, Esther's son Lewis McKenzie Judkins was the beneficiary (as her only surviving child) of his \$10,000 estate. He also inherited Lewis's magnificent gold-headed cane, presented to him in gratitude in 1862 for his courtesy as Mayor during their occupation of Alexandria by the 8th Illinois Calvary: its inscription read, "knowing your duty and daring to do it."

Despite Lewis's progressive business views, in 1860 he had three slaves living under his roof, and he owned them: a 37 year old mulatto woman, a 12 year old black girl and a 35 year old black woman, all presumably working to keep the house clean and its occupants fed.

As well as banking and railroads, the mechanically-inclined Lewis also took an interest in domestic matters. Later in life, Lewis installed Alexandria's first bathtub with running water: the drain from the tub passed through a hole in the wall and splashed on the garden below.



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ALEXANDRIA.

Above

Conjectural Drawing of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House Prior to 1835 Fire. The McKenzie family's church was known for the distinctive gilded bell in its copula. Drawing first appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, February 1880.

Lewis McKenzie would have had cause to celebrate in his Protestant way that night of May 26, 1859: he won both the County (1031–301) and the seat in the Virginia House of Delegates.

“There have been few Alexandrians whose fortunes, political and otherwise, waxed and waned more than Mr. McKenzie’s,” the *Alexandria Gazette* reported (June 29) in an extraordinary obituary upon his death in 1895. “Like many prominent men, he had his peculiarities, paradoxes, inconsistencies and freaks.” This may have referred to his caustic wit and personal attacks on his political opponents or perhaps it was that gold-headed cane and the memories it rekindled. ■

Opposite

Old Presbyterian Meeting House, c1960. The church was rebuilt following a fire caused by a lightning strike in 1835. The burial ground visible in the foreground is the final resting place of Lewis McKenzie.

Courtesy of Library of Congress



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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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