

Voting Viva Voce

UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS



Robert Miller

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Profile

Robert Miller

by

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A prominent citizen, leading anti-slavery advocate and Opposition voter still suffers the penalties of the Union occupation of Alexandria during the Civil War.

Robert Miller, 61, would have made his way through the Election Day crowd slowly on May 26, 1859, hailed by friends and acquaintances eager to shake his hands and share a few words—and perhaps a few emotional outbursts.

His Opposition political views would have been well known—and only to be expected of such a staunch Quaker. But the stakes were high, with the tensions over slavery increasing and John Brown’s October raid on the US Armory at Harper’s Ferry was already in the planning stages. In almost two years to the day, Virginia would vote to leave the Union and join the Confederacy.

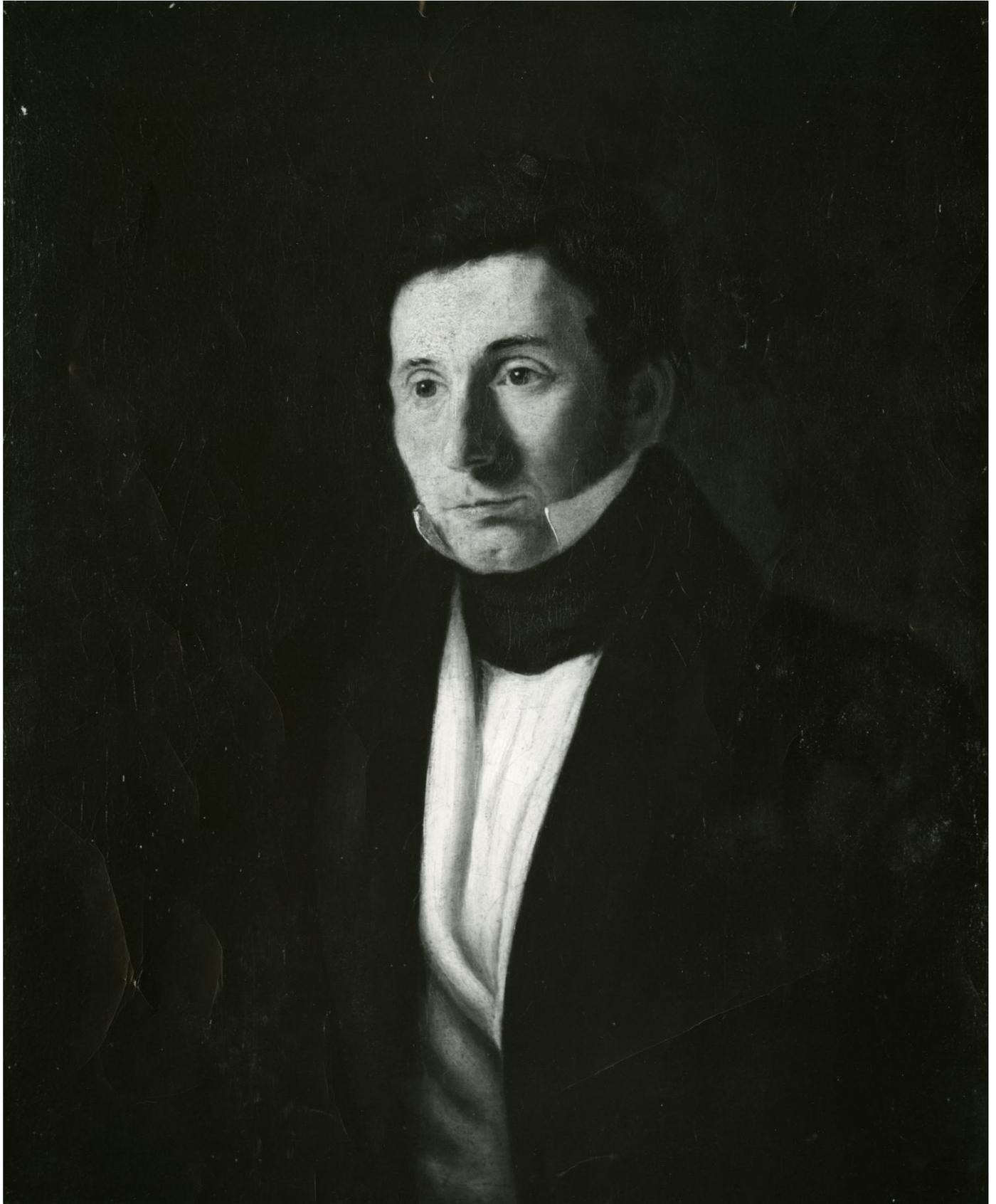
Like his father Mordecai before him, Robert was a merchant and a citizen of considerable substance. He was among the richest men in the city, being ranked 3rd in the 1860 census of self-declared value of his real and personal estates (\$160,000) and 5th in taxable wealth on the city’s 1859 tax assessment lists (\$76,840). Robert was both influential and powerful: a member of Alexandria’s elite. He called out his vote: Thomas—McKenzie—Goggin—Wiley—Preston. Candidate for the Virginia House of Burgess, Lewis McKenzie, was well-known to Miller. Both were civic-minded men of business and trustees of the Female Orphan’s Asylum.

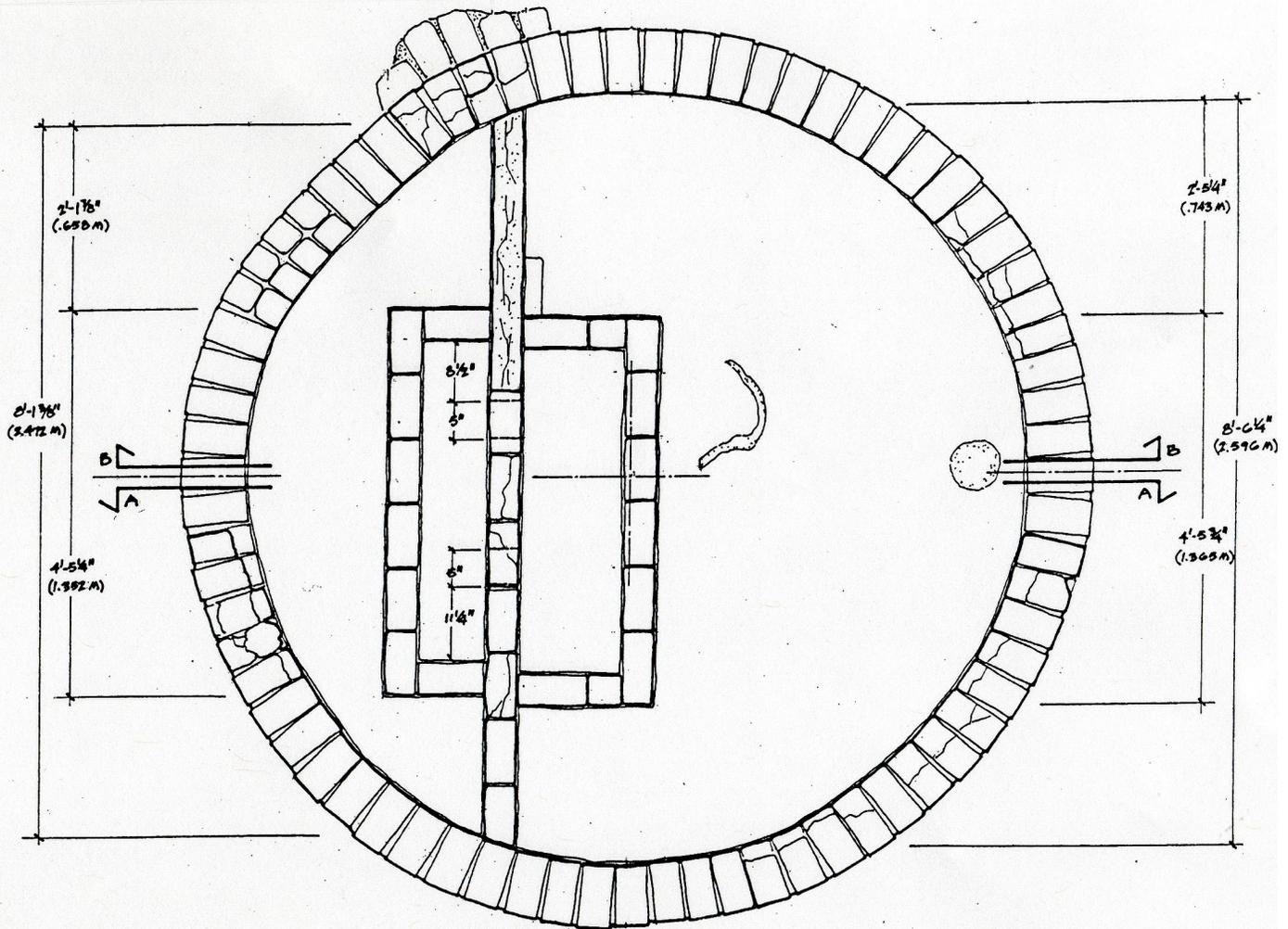
Unlike most other men of significant wealth in Alexandria—and like all of the Quaker community—Robert owned no slaves. And unlike three of his fellow Alexandrian Quakers, Samuel Howell, Richard Janney, and Samuel Janney,

Opposite and cover

Portrait of Robert H Miller, date unknown.

Courtesy of Alexandria Library, Special Collections





Drawing of the Brick Cistern at 108-110 South St. Asaph Street. Robert Miller's father Mordecai Miller had built the home around 1805. Several members of the Miller family lived in the home before it was sold to Robert Miller, who owned the property from 1833 to 1852. When archaeologists excavated Miller's c1836 cistern in 1977, they discovered a filtration system of charcoal, sand, and gravel (the rectangular compartments against either side of the dividing wall). Water would enter on the eastern side, flow through a hole at the bottom of the dividing wall, flow through the western filter where it would be purified before being removed from the cistern. Miller was one of the founders of the Alexandria Water Company, which was established in 1851 to pipe clean water to the city's residents. By 1860 most of Alexandria was connected to city water. Since 1977, several other cisterns with filtration systems have been excavated by Alexandria's City Archaeologists.

Courtesy of Alexandria Archaeology

he did not rent in slaves either. The domestic work in the Miller household—managed by Robert’s wife Anna—was the province of Irish immigrants. Among the Miller’s domestic workers were Julia Downey and perhaps her son 20 year-old Laurence Downey, and an 18 year-old Irishwoman, Betty O’Flannigan. Another young woman Margaret Deacins, 27, listed in the census as a boarder, may also have worked as a domestic servant.

Apart from the business of moving to a new home, the domestic tasks must have been less onerous than earlier in the decade when many more of Robert and Anna’s eleven children were living at home. Only two children remained at home in 1859: Caroline, 18, and Eliza, 16. Caroline (a popular girl, known to all as Carrie) was a day student at the Alexandria Female Seminary, established and run by James Hallowell, a member of another prominent family in the tight-knit, intermarrying Quaker community.

The curriculum was comprehensive and rigorous. Unfortunately, some thought, the Seminary didn’t teach the social graces or accomplishments young ladies of the era were expected to possess. Carrie struggled with astronomy and algebra and complained to her father that the schoolroom was cold. But the teaching must have been effective, because when Eliza went on to boarding school in Pennsylvania the other students thought she was a mathematical genius! Carrie may not have enjoyed algebra, but she was certainly literate and disciplined; she kept a diary for much of her life.

Many of the girls’ brothers and sisters had moved to rural Silver Spring, Maryland, and the two spent months at a time visiting their siblings there. Carrie’s future husband Roger and his cousin Willie were among the young men she met in Silver Spring. On December 9, 1859 (when she was 17 years old), Carrie wrote that “Willie Brooke and Roger Farquhar came in [to visit], they stayed until 9 1/2 o’clock, we played backgammon, and I enjoyed their call very much as I like them both exceedingly. Willie told me I must appreciate his visit, as he had walked all the way.”

Robert would have had family matters occupying his thoughts on Election Day 1859. He had recently built a fine duplex home on a property he’d purchased in 1853 and was planning to give one side to his third son and business partner, Elisha, as a wedding gift. In June 1859 the southern “of the two brick tenements recently erected,” then number 77 North Washington

Street (now 323 North Washington Street), was conveyed to Elisha by Robert and Anna Miller “in consideration of one dollar, and of the affection which they bear for their son.” The northern duplex, number 75 (now 321), was Robert and Anna’s home.

Robert’s considerable wealth was generated from many different enterprises. The first was a china, glass, and ceramics store at the corner of King and Fairfax Street, the retail heart of Alexandria. In 1825, shortly after he and Anna were married, young Robert was advertising:

China cups and saucers, Tea plates & snuff boxes, Imitation China pitchers, Mugs and bowls, Lustre pitchers of all sizes, mugs and cans With a drawing of La Fayette & the surrender of Cornwallis. Executed expressly for him, from a drawing sent out.

Whiteware ceramics were marked “Manufactured for Robt H. Miller/ Alexandria DC.” These proved to be so popular that in March 1826 Robert offered “a further supply of Lafayette Ware” along with “tea-sets gold edge and view of Mount Vernon.” Building on his success, Robert and two of his sons, John and Charles, established a similar business in St. Louis in 1852. In 1857 the Warrenton Whig commented on the Alexandria shop as an “elegant China establishment...where the most fashionable can call and be accommodated with everything that is elegant.” By 1859 the Alexandria business, RH Miller, Son & Company netted total annual sales of \$40,000 a year.

But there was more: Robert was president of the First National Bank of Alexandria, an officer of the Mount Vernon Hotel Company, and a partner in his father’s shipping concern. He also invested in the Mount Vernon Cotton Manufacturing Company. These enterprises were enough to make Robert wealthy, but his interests and enthusiasms went far beyond money-making activities.

As an educated man, looking to the future and with an optimistic, scientific bent, he believed in the potential of public infrastructure. Robert was one of the first stockholders of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad and the Alexandria, Loudoun and Hampshire Railroad. He served on the Board of Directors of the Alexandria Canal Company.

Clean water was perhaps the most intense of his avocations. At a time when epidemics were all too common, safe water was vital not only for public health,



Whiteware Plate Fragment, c1830. As a merchant, Robert Miller, sometimes ordered pieces for his store specially made from English potteries. This plate fragment is from one such piece. The mark reads: "Manufactured for Rob't H. Miller. Alexandria. DC." The plate was manufactured after 1822 when Miller founded his china shop and prior to 1846 when Alexandria was part of the District of Columbia. This fragment was found in 1979 during archaeological excavations at 420 South Royal Street. The excavations were part of a larger archaeological project examining the free African-American neighborhood of Hayti and the lives of its inhabitants. George Brooks, a free African-American, resided on the property from 1832 to 1867. Brooks or a member of his family may have owned the plate and then disposed of it after it broke. It is worth noting that Miller and his fellow Quakers were supporters of the abolition movement. He and his father, Mordecai Miller, built nine homes on the 400 block of South Royal, which they rented and sold to African-Americans.

Courtesy of Alexandria Archaeology



The Miller Sisters, unknown date. Robert and Anna Miller's five daughters sat together for this photograph, which may have been taken in the aftermath of the Civil War. Corrie (Cornelia) Miller Stabler (center), Sarah Miller Hallowell (lower right), **Caroline (Carrie) Miller Farquhar** (upper right), Mariana Miller Reese (upper left), and Eliza H Miller (lower left).

Courtesy of Sandy Spring Museum

but also commerce. City archaeologists at Alexandria Archaeology were fascinated to discover in 1977 that Robert had built a water filtration system on his St. Asaph Street property where he resided from 1833 to 1852 (now 108–110 South St. Asaph Street). His interest in clean water extended beyond his own household's needs. In 1850 he was one of the founders and president of the Alexandria Water Company, which brought most of Alexandria fresh water by 1860. An avid reader of the scientific literature of the day, Robert was also a cultured man who read the best English prose and poetry, subjects for his lectures at the Alexandria Lyceum. As a trustee of the Female Orphans Asylum, and as a prominent member of the Alexandria Quakers (with Anna), Robert was very much involved in the public life of the City and was elected to serve on the Town Council for several terms

But Robert's most profound legacy was in making real estate available to Alexandria's large free black population. His father Mordecai, who purchased slaves' freedom (including Rachael Branham and her daughters, Marsolina and Almira, from George Washington Custis of Arlington House) had built nine houses on the 400 block of South Royal Street which he rented to free black families. Robert continued his father's practice of buying slaves to free them, sometimes taking an indirect route. On July 7, 1843, Robert sold (for \$50 each) Sarah and Eugenia Harrison and Caroline F Brannum, ages 13, 11, and 15 respectively, to residents of Washington DC on the condition that they would never leave the city and that each would be freed when she turned 21. In the 1830s and 40s Robert began the practice of selling African-American families the freehold titles to the houses his father had built and rented to free blacks; allowing the Delaneys, the Hamiltons, the Fraziers, and others to become homeowners and acquire enough taxable wealth to declare it on their 1859 personal property taxes.

Two years after the May 26, 1859 election, Robert's orderly, progressive world was in tatters as Alexandria became a Union Army garrison city (See Emma Green profile). Robert Miller was chosen to represent the city in sensitive negotiations with the newly-arrived Federal troops. His vulnerability quickly increased.

Like the Greens, the Millers faced the threat of losing their considerable property interests to the Union Army, a threat intensified when they joined other Alexandrians in temporarily leaving the city soon after the Union Army

began their occupation. While they were probably unaware of the risk, this opened up the potential for all of the Miller's extensive real estate holdings to be seized by the Army as "abandoned" property. Robert returned and, like James Green, defended what was rightfully his. Complicating matters, Miller, as an officer of a chartered public utility company, was required under new laws to sign an oath of allegiance to the US Government and Constitution, something he refused to do.

An Opposition voter, a Union sympathizer, a pacifist, and a man who had risked alienation in a slaveholding city to advance the prospects of black people, Robert found that his wealth and past positions in the city offered little protection in a town under Union military rule and occupation. The US military authorities made no distinction between those engaged in slavery and those fundamentally opposed to it. In a city occupied by the US military, Miller's defiance, like James Green's, in refusing to take the oath of allegiance defined him as an enemy of the Union and aligned him with the Confederacy.

Warwick Miller said that, "[our father] was a strong Union man. ...but when the Federal troops came to Alexandria and 'invaded the state'...[he] went with the state to my grief." Robert's absence and his commitment to Virginia further compromised his position with the Union forces.

With these "two strikes" against him, it was not long before the military took possession of his half of the Washington Street duplex, holding it for the next four years. Later in the War, in October 1864, the US Army would nominate Robert Miller as one of the "safe guards" to ride on Orange and Alexandria and the Manassas Gap Railroads "to prevent an attack by the Confederates." Edgar Snowden, editor of the Gazette and nine other local citizens (including one minister and two local civilian doctors) were arrested on Sunday October 16 under the authority of the US Military Commandant and held at the Office of the Military Provost Judge at 7 North Fairfax Street. On Monday, October 17 part of the group was placed on the 5am train and the rest on a train departing Alexandria at 11am. The local outrage was considerable and Robert Miller was not arrested or used as surety on this occasion.

Warwick Miller's diary goes on to say that,

father and many other Alexandrians refused to take the federal oath of allegiance which led to very unpleasant results. At one time there

were many guerrillas in Fairfax [County] who fired on every railroad train going to the front; to check this, the General in command ordered that certain leading citizens of Alexandria should be put in the cabin of the engine to deter the guerrillas from firing; father was to be one. Uncle Frank who knew Montgomery Blair [Postmaster General in Lincoln's cabinet until September, 1864] very well stated the case to him and the order was countermanded. Another time it was ordered that Alexandrians who would not take the oath should be sent down the river to the Confederate lines. Father and mother expected to go but by Uncle Frank's efforts this was stopped.

Several Union officers and their families very likely including Major John Beveridge, commander of the Eighth Illinois Cavalry, had been enjoying that “fine brick building” “lately occupied by...E.J. Miller, and the new house adjoining the latter, on Washington St...”¹ and shared some of that space with a medical dispensary. It is likely Beveridge, a lawyer, conducted court martial proceedings from the Miller home. In 1862, the house had become a Contraband Hospital, sheltering many black people who, destitute after fleeing slavery, arrived in Alexandria hungry and in ill health.

Julia Wilbur, abolitionist and one of Alexandria's first freedman's aid workers, said the Miller duplex was “the only good building the contrabands occupy” but noted that it housed up to 115 people. Many of those were forced to leave to make room for Wilbur's own occupation of the southern half of the building. Wilbur's companion, Harriet Jacobs, was an escaped slave who resided in New York and came south with the backing of New York Quakers. Together they occupied the southern half of the Miller home while serving Alexandria's rapidly increasing freedmen population. Wilbur's place of work was the Contraband Hospital housed in the northern half of the duplex. Overcrowded and housing up to 140 patients, Wilbur described the hospital as “a loathsome place.” Among staff hired to work in the Hospital was Edward Janney, a 27 year-old and a recent graduate of medical school in Baltimore. Janney was a native of Alexandria, a Quaker, and a cousin to Anna Miller, Robert's wife and Elisha's mother. He found himself working in a house he likely knew quite well.

With the end of the war, the Miller family properties slowly were returned to them and on November 20, 1867, 77 North Washington Street was the

scene of a most romantic wedding. On that day, Carrie, Robert and Anna's daughter, married Roger Farquhar, now a farmer. Roger was an ardent suitor who courted her for six years, while facing several rivals for her affection, including his cousin Willie.

In his diary Roger recorded that when he went to Alexandria to ask for Carrie's hand in marriage, her father, "thought it too great a change for her to make and though he did not positively refuse consent, it was evident he did not approve of the plan." Carrie's life as a farmer's wife indeed would be very different from her life in Alexandria before the War where she went calling on family, played croquet and whist with friends, attended Sewing Society, and helped her mother with cleaning, quilting and scrapbooking. In spite of the prospect of more difficult circumstances, Carrie told Roger she'd made up her mind to share his fortunes through life.

The Miller duplex, now with a new street address as 321–323 North Washington Street is remarkably intact, with only a couple of small additions. It retains its original cornice and window hoods, and even several of the original windows. The Contraband Hospital did not disappear without a trace. A Miller descendant is quoted as offering this lurid explanation for the residual damage, "the now filled in bullet holes in the front parlor floor where operations took place...[were] put there for draining of blood!" And the many deaths there were said to have left remnants of a "spectral" nature...Perhaps, more cheerfully, on quiet evenings we can imagine we hear echoes of Carrie's cheerful games of whist and flirtatious encounters with gentleman callers.

Robert would live four more productive years after Carrie's wedding. At the time of his death in 1874, he was President of Citizen's National Bank and President of the Alexandria Water Company. His story did not end there: he has since become one of the most-admired figures of Alexandria's colorful history, especially with the work of Alexandria Archaeology, which has delved into Robert's life, his times, his good works...and even his back garden. ■

Endnote

- 1 Abner Hard, *History of the Eighth Cavalry Regiment, Illinois Volunteers, During the Great Rebellion* (Memphis, Tennessee: General Books, 2010 reprint), pp 24–25. *The Local News*, January 27, 1862.



321-323 South Washington Street, Civil War Era. By June 1859, Robert Miller had finished building the duplex and lived in the northern residence (right side). At the time it was numbered 75-77 Washington Street. Robert and Anna gifted the other residence to their third son, Elisha, and his wife. During the Civil War, the Miller duplex was used first as a medical dispensary and then served as a Contraband Hospital.
Courtesy of National Archives

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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

Text | Donald A. DeBats

Design | Anne Chesnut

Published by The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities

In conjunction with the generous support of: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, Flinders University, National Endowment for the Humanities, Australian Research Council, and Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities

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