

# Voting Viva Voce

UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS

## The Election of March 2, 1874 in Newport, Kentucky

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Public Voting

# The Election of March 2, 1874 in Newport, Kentucky

by  
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The first Monday in March was Newport's municipal Election Day. The 1874 election occurred in the midst of an industrial strike which had disrupted the town and its economy; the election outcome would determine control of the local police power.

Newport had been designed by its founder, James Taylor, as an industrial city—a vision which was succeeding in the 1870s when the town could boast over 2000 industrial jobs, largely in the manufacture of iron and steel.

The Swift Iron and Steel Mill was the largest of these enterprises, sprawling along the Licking River, just down from the mouth of the Ohio and employing 610 workers. The strike at the Swift Mill convulsed the city and put enormous pressure on its local government.

Newport's electorate was decidedly mixed: the expanding industrial base attracted European immigrants, particularly from Ireland and the German provinces. The Taylor family continued to bring new housing areas to market, always called additions, platted in small lots, which facilitated the development of a worker owner city. The African-American population was tiny, making up less than one percent of the total population of 17,046, and was concentrated along the Ohio River. The Irish-born were more dispersed across the city than the African-Americans but less dispersed than the large German-born population which spread across the urban fabric. The three largest religious institutions in town were Catholic: two German churches, St. Stephen's and Corpus Christi, and one Irish, Immaculate Conception. The strike involved men, and their families, from all these groups and identities.

As the strike deepened, the City Council and Mayor came under pressure from Alexander Swift, the Mill's owner and founder, to prohibit gatherings of townspeople who were harassing the strike-breakers as they came and left work. These men, many of them African-Americans, were imported from

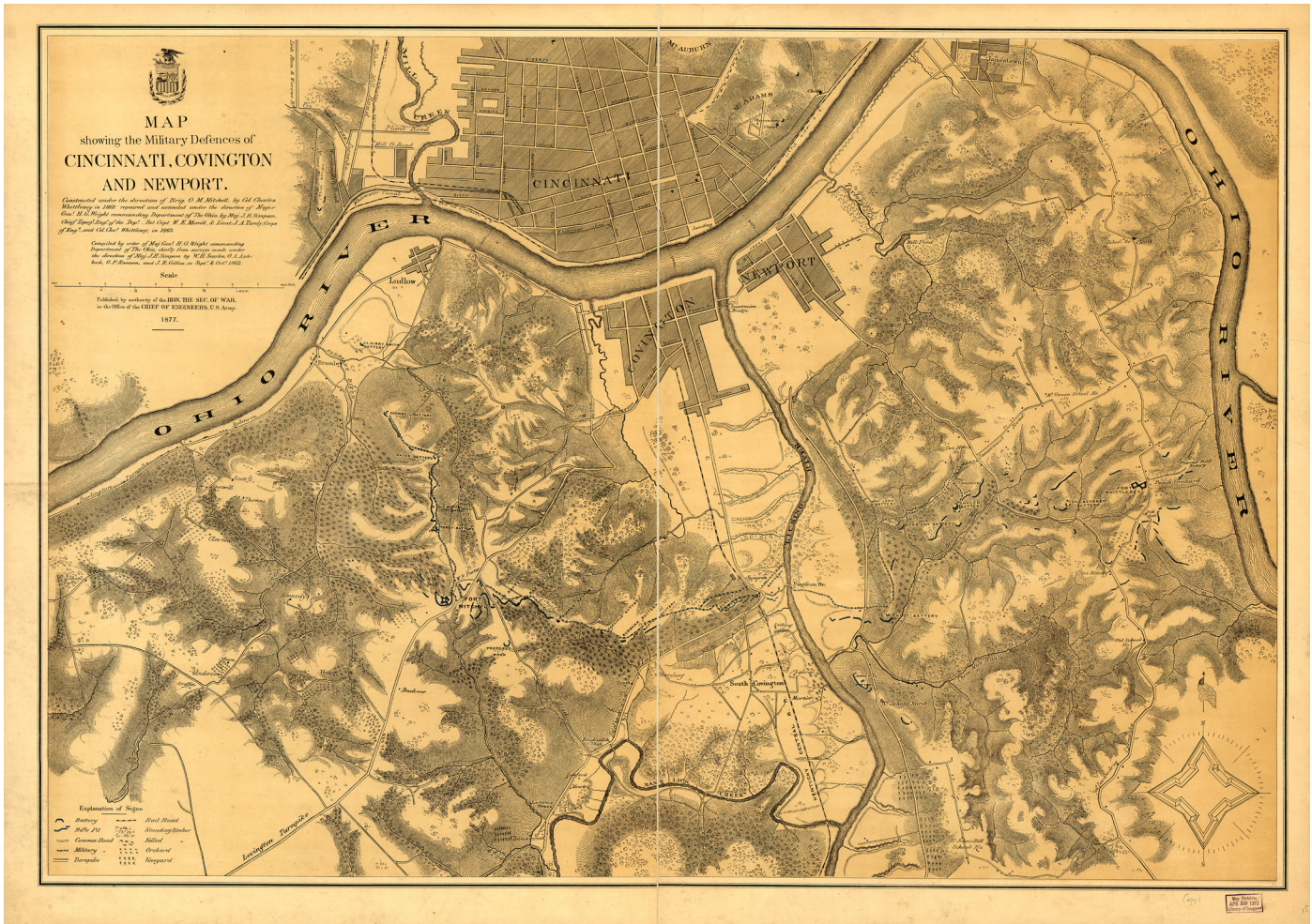


City of Cincinnati, 1872. This steel engraving depicts the Ohio River separating the city of Cincinnati (right) and the town of Newport (left foreground). The Licking River can also be seen dividing Newport from the town of Covington, Kentucky (left background). The industrial development of the three towns along the Ohio River banks is apparent.

Courtesy of Library of Congress



out of town by Swift. Though housed on barges moored in the Ohio River, these men became the target of intense hostility, much of it led by wives of striking workers. The Council refused to prohibit gatherings and Swift armed his strike breakers. Violence escalated and the death of a bystander prompted



Cover and above

Map Showing the Military Defences of Cincinnati, Covington, and Newport, 1877. Newport is located southeast of Cincinnati at the confluence of the Licking and Ohio Rivers

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Opposite

The Ignorant Vote—Honors are Easy, 1876. In this political cartoon, Thomas Nast depicts the Southern African-American voters and the Northern Irish Catholic voters with equal disdain. It appeared in the December 9, 1876 issue of *Harper's Weekly*. Both African-Americans and Irish Catholic participated in Newport's March 2, 1874 election.

Courtesy of Library of Congress



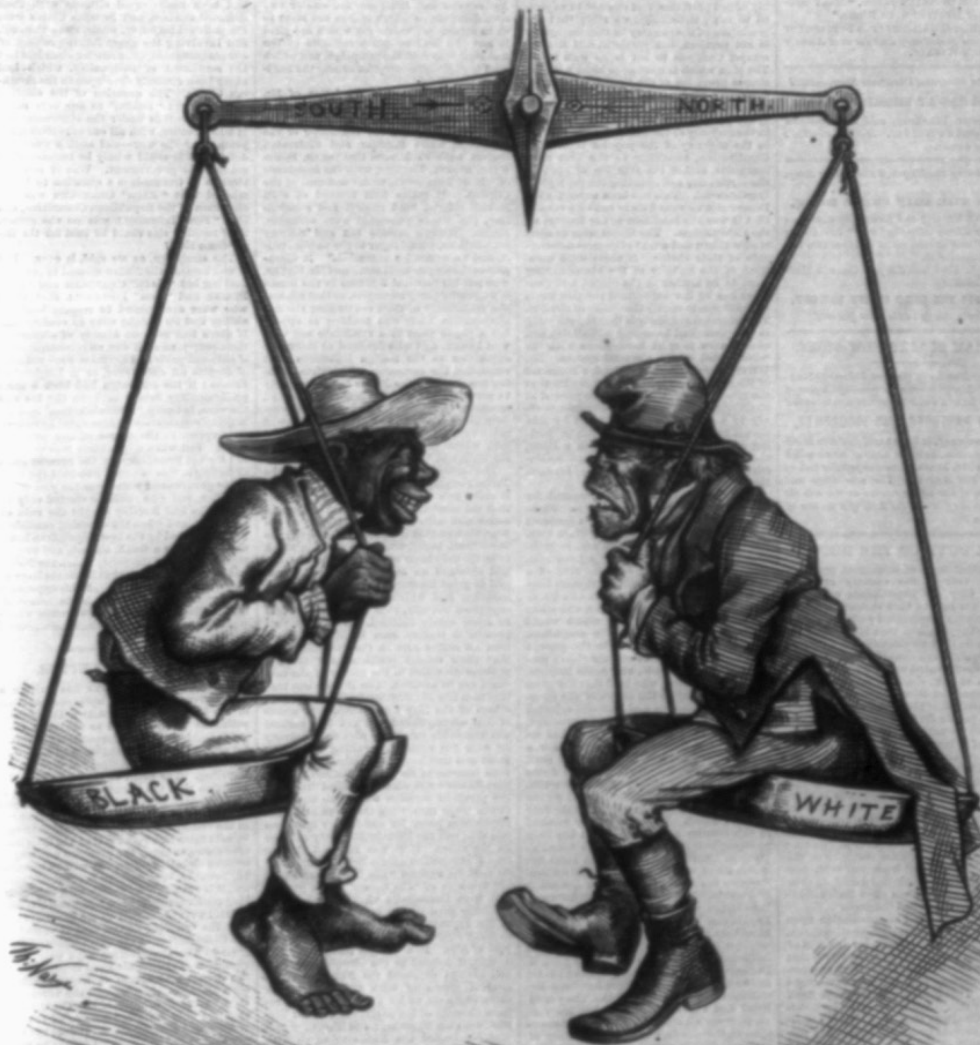
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THE HONORABLE VOTE—HONORS ARE EASY.



a Council ban on all demonstrations and a call by the Mayor, accepted by the Governor, to place the 334 US Federal troops at the Newport Barracks, under the Mayor's control as "troops in aid of civil authorities."

The election of March 2 came just eight days after the killing of a young butcher apprentice in the midst of a clash of armed strike breakers and local residents. The citizens of Newport went to the five polling stations to elect a new city government. Turnout was high and the results were close across the nine contested city-wide offices: a tie with exactly the same number of voters (790) favoring Republican as Democratic candidates. Democratic voters were more consistently loyal to their party than were Republicans with 18 percent of voters calling out a complete Democrat slate as opposed to just half of that core strength on the Republican side. Democrats secured the position of President of the City Council in Albert Berry, who would go on to become Mayor at the next election. But Republicans took the position of City Clerk (the most closely fought office in the election) and City Attorney while also holding the office of City Treasurer which was not contested. In a tight election, strength of partisanship could be a deceptive predictor of electoral success. ■

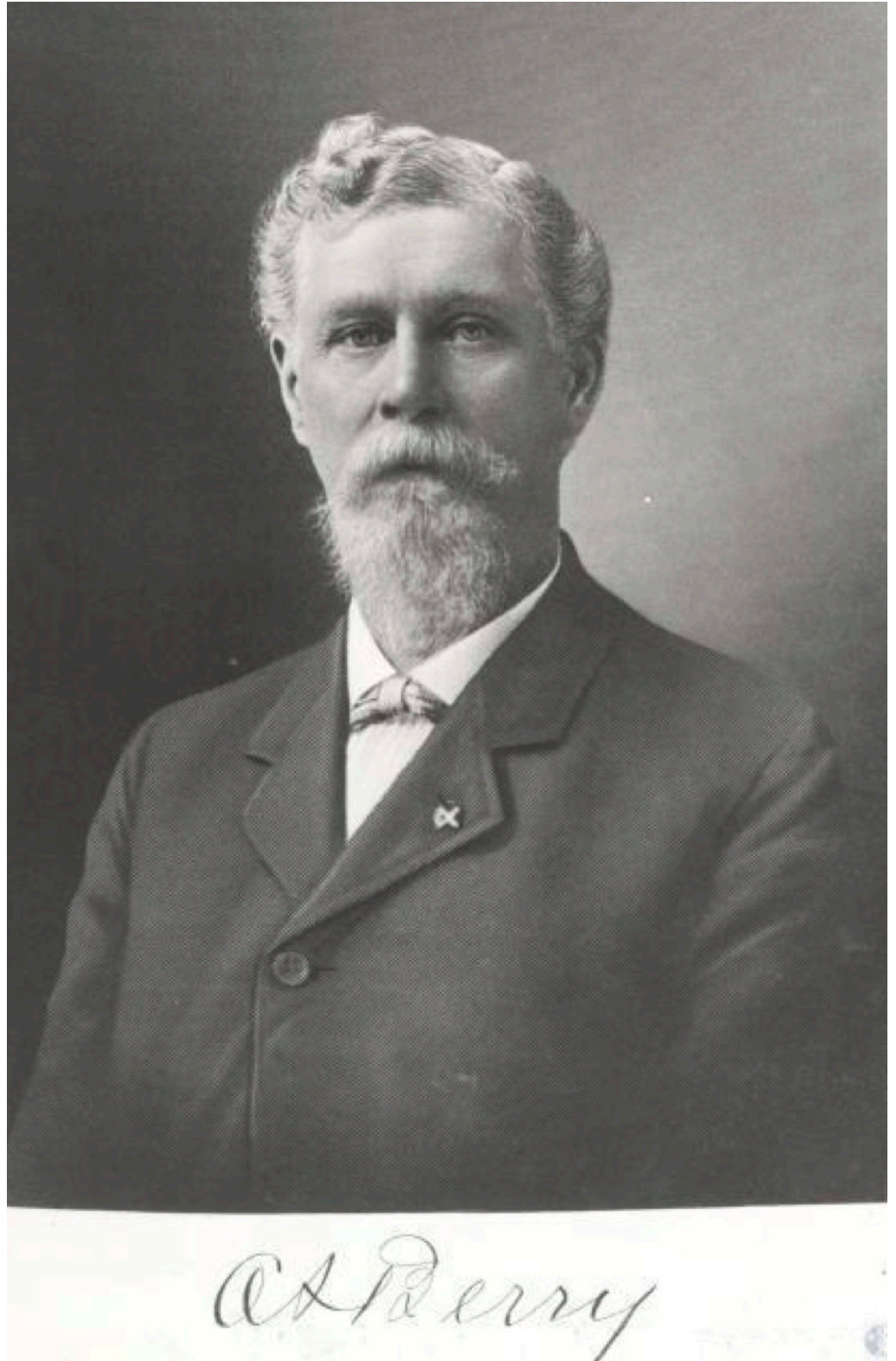
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Opposite

Portrait of Albert Berry, c1890. Berry, a Democrat, was elected President of the Newport City Council in the March 2, 1874 elections. He went on to serve as Mayor of Newport, a representative of the Kentucky Senate, and a member of the US House of Representatives.

Courtesy of Kenton County Public Library, Covington, Kentucky







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UNLOCKING THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF PAST POLITICS

## Voting Viva Voce

### *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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