

**Patronage Politics in Small Cities in Nineteenth Century America:
Evidence from Alexandria, Virginia and Newport, Kentucky**

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The literature on patronage politics – the partisan use of public office to appoint individuals dedicated to the welfare of a political machine – tends to focus on large cities in the mid and late nineteenth century. New York City’s Tammany Society became Tammany Hall and grew into the Tweed machine by mid-century; twentieth century variations included the Hague machine in New Jersey, the Pendergast machine in Kansas City, and the Daley machine Chicago. Political appointees became the institutionalized and protected base from which lower-level ward heelers fanned out to bring in the vote to ensure the machine of its continued political monopoly.

What is the evidence of such machines taking root in smaller cities such as Alexandria, Virginia and Newport, Kentucky between 1860 and 1870? Did this type of politics exist then and there too?

Alexandria, Virginia and Newport, Kentucky in the mid-nineteenth century were small cities of fewer than 20,000 residents, with limited sources of revenue for personnel budgets where political appointees might be placed. Most municipal officials were elected: 16 in Newport, 14 in Alexandria. Political offices in both cities were also closely contested, ensuring a wider knowledge of exactly how the misuse of authority for partisan purposes might be accomplished. Given their political competitiveness, neither city could be characterized as controlled by a political monopoly. While patronage networks can and did develop in almost any context, Alexandria and Newport were, in all these respects, unpromising places for the development of a partisan hierarchy capable of awarding jobs in exchange for votes.¹

There were nevertheless **potential** patronage networks in both cities. The table below lists 53 second order non-elected occupations, reported in the relevant federal census and city directories that could conceivably have been awarded on partisan grounds. These occupations are coded in the table below according to the databases supporting this project: occupations 800 and above (three quarters of the total in both cities) were in the public sector, the base upon which we would expect a patronage system to develop.

The men in these positions did not account to a large portion of the employed in either city (1.9 percent in Alexandria; 1.2 percent in Newport); employment in both cities was overwhelmingly in the private sector. One measure of whether the men holding these positions could be considered political appointees is their own record as voters in the elections under consideration in this project: the 1859 state election in Alexandria and the 1874 municipal election in Newport.

Potential Patronage Positions Using Occupation Function Codes

Functional Code	Number in Alexandria	Number who voted	Number in Newport	Number who voted
180 Post Trader, US Army	0	-	1	1
333 Street Car Conductor	0	-	4	2
351 Ferry Boat Fare Conductor	0	-	2	1
369 Master Commissioner	0	-	1	1

¹ See, for example, Alan Lessoff and James J. Connolly, “From Political Insult to political Theory: The Boss, the Machine, and the Pluralist City,” *The Journal of Policy History*, 25 (2, 2013): 139-72,

482 Coal Office Clerk	1	0	3	2
485 Gas Works Clerk	1	1	0	-
486 Gas House Worker	0	-	1	0
514 Magistrate	2	1	1	1
603 Coal Wharf Boss	1	1	0	-
607 Yard Master	0	-	2	1
646 Gas Inspector	0	-	2	0
652 Tobacco Inspector	0	-	1	0
760 Grave Digger	2	1	0	-
801 Auditor's Messenger	1	0	0	-
802 Asst City Treasurer	0	-	1	1
803 Council Messenger	1	1	0	-
804 Deputy County Clerk	3	0	0	-
806 City Collector	1	1	1	0
808 Toll Keeper	0	-	3	2
809 Canal Collector	1	1	0	-
810 Collector	4	3	2	1
811 Light House Keeper	1	0	1	0
812 Harbor Master	1	1	0	-
813 Lock Keeper	5	3	0	-
814 Treasury Clerk	1	1	0	-
815 Custom House	3	3	0	-
816 Customs Collector	1	1	0	-
819 Grain Inspector	0	-	1	0
820 Flour Inspector	1	1	0	-
821 Asst Flour Inspector	1	1	0	-
822 Liquor Inspector	1	0	1	1
824 Bailiff/ Deputy County Clerk	0	-	1	0
825 Deputy City Collector	0	-	1	0
827 Superintendent, Public Schools	0	-	1	0
830 Notary Public	1	1	0	-
835 Commissioner in Chancery	1	1	0	-
841 Police Officer	1	1	5	2
842 Constable	5	4	2	1
843 Captain of Watch	1	1	0	-
844 Watchman	5	4	22	5
846 Deputy Sheriff	0	-	1	0
847 Deputy City Marshall	0	-	1	1
849 Clerk, County Clerk's Department	0	-	2	0
860 Postmaster	1	1	1	1
861 Post Office Clerk	1	1	3	1
862 Mail Agent	5	2	1	1
863 Mail Contractor	1	0	0	-
866 Mail Carrier	2	0	0	-
867 Post Office Messenger	1	0	0	-
890 US Government Clerk	6	4	0	-
891 US Government Employee	1	1	0	-
892 Messenger	0	-	4	1
893 Assessor, US Revenue, Asst Assessor	0	-	1	0
Total In PPP	65	42	74	27
Total In Occupations	3452		6225	

The turnout of men in these positions was slightly higher in Alexandria (65 percent) than the mid-range estimate for the city (56 percent of the eligible electorate) and significantly lower in Newport: 37 percent against a mid-range estimate of turnout for the city of 50 percent of the eligible population. These levels of turnout, even in Alexandria, do not appear to be at the level one would

expect from a patronage-based segment of the labor force whose jobs were based upon voter mobilization.

(Matt: I could do another table of the partisan loyalty of all of these men – 42 in Alexandria and 27 in Newport -- if we wanted to extend the point from participation to partisanship)

The absence of patronage-related positions in city government does not preclude the possibility of top-down efforts to deliver the vote of citizens by other means. The preservation of a daily newspaper in Alexandria (*The Alexandria Gazette*) allows us to locate charges of patronage-type behavior in both the private and public sectors and to evaluate those charges with some precision. Three such charges appeared in the *Gazette* in 1859. The first two were allegations of local businesses using their power to employ to deliver the vote of employees: by demanding that employees vote in a particular way and/or punishing them for not doing so by ending their employment.

On May 28, two days after the election, George H. Richards, a city grocer and holder of a license to operate as a carter, a transporter of goods throughout the city, inserted a notice in the *Gazette* to refute a charge that he has fired James Macfarlan and seven others, “because they would not vote the Whig ticket.” Richards denied the allegation, saying only Macfarlane had been fired “...for drunkenness, and worthlessness, and for that alone. No one else was discharged.”

A more serious charge, also related to the use of private power over employment to influence the vote of employees, appeared earlier, before the election, in a letter to the *Gazette* on May 6 addressed to the President and Directors of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad Company. The Democratic Party was split over the nominee for the Congressional seat to be filled at the election, divided between Thomas Shackelford, who was on the Board of Directors of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, and William Smith. “A Stockholder” wrote to ask for comment on a published allegation that, “EVERY MEANS is, *doubtless*, used, to urge, or if possible to constrain, men, connected with the road, to vote for Mr. Shackelford, who is a director.” The charge was “that you permit *constraint* to be used upon your employees to vote for Mr. Shackelford – that you employ your official authority, or suffer others to do it, to interfere with the ‘freedom of elections.’ “

This charge was never answered, but we can provide a partial test of the allegation by examining the political performance of the 66 railroad employees who lived in Alexandria and were employed as baggage masters (8), brakemen (8), conductors (12), contractors (4), construction supervisor (1), engineers (15), firemen (14), and superintendents (4) . The 1860 industrial census indicated that the Orange and Alexandria employed 60 hands in the city and we cannot be certain that all 66 men listed with railroad occupations were employed by the Orange and Alexandria line though it is likely that the great majority were. There is little evidence of the suasive power of employment being deployed to influence the political behavior of these 66 railroad employees: if there was an effort to deploy such power, it was of little effect. Of the 66 railroad men in Alexandria only 19 voted (a turnout rate of 29 percent) and they split in their vote eleven for the Opposition party and eight for the Democrats. Only one of the Democrats voted for Shackelford for Congress: conductor William Pauler.

The one case of patronage politics that was discussed in the *Gazette* and does appear valid concerned not Alexandria-based efforts in the public or private sector to influence political

outcomes of employees, but the much better organized and effective political machine of the national Democratic Party to discipline its political appointees. William Smith won the Congressional seat for the 7th District of Virginia in the election of May 26, 1859. Beginning in June letters began appearing in the *Gazette* from John T. Johnston. Johnston had long been employed in the US Customs House in Alexandria and claimed he had been dismissed from office because, while a strong Democrat, and something of the core of the party in Alexandria, he had consistently opposed William Smith for office and had voted against him in favour of Henry Shackelford, also a Democrat but opposed by the main Democratic Party, in the election. James Fossett, also of Alexandria, had also been dismissed from the local Federal Customs office. He too had voted a Democratic ticket in the 1859 Congressional election, but voting for Shackelford for Congress rather than Smith. Johnston had abstained from voting in the simultaneous House of Delegate election while Fossett voted for Lewis McKenzie, an Alexandria resident standing for the Opposition Party for the Virginia House of Delegates.

Johnston then recapped the case against him and the actions of the US Treasurer, Howell Cobb, and the President of the United States, James Buchanan:

It is well known that I have been a constant and consistent political opponent of Wm Smith and that I have never voted for him. This provoked his hostility and he determined to have his revenge. He sought its gratification by an effort, in 1857, to effect the removal of Edward S. Hough, esq. from the Collectorship of this port, and sought to place in his stead, his cousin, Richard M Smith, knowing that he could rely upon him to remove all the subordinates from office who were obnoxious to him, and fill their positions with those who were subservient to his will. It is well known that Wm. Smith was defeated in this attempt to inflict a punishment for independent thought, and for the free exercise of the elective franchise. In the exercise of my right as a freeman, I thought proper, in the Congressional election of 1857, to vote for a Democrat to go to the Congress of the United States, in opposition to Wm. Smith. Availing himself of the authority and influence which the corrupting usage of recent years allows to each member of Congress over the Executive appointments in his own district, he attempted to induce the Administration at Washington to be guilty of the petty tyranny of expelling me from the humble office which I held; he formally applied to the Secretary of the Treasury for an order to the Collector for my removal. When one of my friends called upon the Secretary, to know whether such a demand had been made, and whether a defence could be heard, he was informed that Mr. Smith had requested my removal on the ground of my opposition to him, and that any defence that I should make in writing, addressed to the Collector at Alexandria, would be considered by the Executive. I accordingly addressed to the Collector, E. S. Hough, esq., a written defence, which is appended to this paper. This defence was referred to the Secretary by Mr. Hough, the Collector. After a lapse of four or five months, I was informed by the Collector that he had received a note from the Secretary and said it would be agreeable to the President, and himself, if I would withdraw my defence from the Department, and that this should be the end of the controversy. With this assurance, I consented to withdraw the document. Thus the matter rested until 1859. In the last election I again refused to support Wm. Smith, and voted for H. Shackelford. Without notice or intimation, an order was made in June, 1859, by the Secretary of the Treasury, for the abolition of the offices held by James Fossett and myself. Several of our personal and political friends accompanied me to the Department and the President's House, after this order was made. The Secretary informed us that Mr. Smith had demanded the removal of Mr. Fossett and myself, on account of our opposition to his election. The Secretary had taken action on this demand by instituting an enquiry whether our offices might not be dispensed with, and had abolished them. The President informed us, that persons who hold office under his Administration would be expected to support the re-election of members of Congress who are friendly to Administration, regardless of their antecedents. Opposition to such a candidate, he regarded as just cause for removal. This position of the President waived all consideration of the political orthodoxy of Mr. Smith, and requires office-holders not only to support candidates who are faithful to their party, but to support every one whom the President may regard as *his* adherent. To this doctrine I do not accede. IN my written defence in 1857, I distinctly informed the Executive that I would hold office on no such condition. Whether in office or out of office, I will only support such candidates as in *my opinion*, personally and politically merit support. My defence in 1857, demonstrated that I was guilty of no offence worth of prescription in opposing Wm. Smith's re-election then. This was conceded by my retention in office, after several months deliberate consideration. Since then nothing has occurred to change my opinion of Mr. Smith; on the contrary, the developments of the recent canvass have strengthened it by the additional lights shed upon his political course. I append two of the most important of these developments. If I was justified or excused in 1857, how could I be fairly condemned in 1859? I have uniformly supported the principles and the candidates of the

Democratic party – never voted for a Whig or American when there was a Democrat in the field. I am now out of office because I regarded a distinguished Democrat more worthy of public station than William Smith.²

In 1860 John T. Johnston was still in Alexandria, as was James Fossett. Johnston was now a very wealthy grocer; Fossett, who lived just few blocks away, was an equally wealthy livery man.

Indeed, the US Customs office in Alexandria stands out in a re-examination of the table of potential patronage positions in the city.³ Not only did the three remaining employees (Isaac Wood, S. King Shay, and John W. Campbell) vote Democratic and for Smith for Congress in 1859, but so did the Collector, Edward S. Hough. Their votes made the metrics of patronage clear: a vote for a local candidate for the Virginia House of Delegates (McKenzie) rather than a vote for the Democratic candidate, but to oppose a Congressional candidate was a bridge too far.

Patronage politics did exist in Alexandria, but, the evidence we have suggests that it arose more from outside the city as a virulent power within the US federal government rather than as an integral part of city politics.

² The *Alexandria Gazette*, August 10, 1859. See also June 29, July 1, July 4, and August 8, 1859.

³ Positions 815 and 816.