

[Editor's Note: In the spring of 2015, the Arlington Historical Society and Columbia Masonic Lodge #285 co-sponsored the third annual Arlington History Essay Contest, intended to encourage interest and research in local history. The contest was open to 11th graders from H-B Woodlawn, Wakefield, Washington-Lee, and Yorktown High Schools. The theme of the contest was "During the Civil War, Arlington (Alexandria County) found itself at the boundary between North and South, both culturally and militarily. Describe and discuss the effect of this juxtaposition, both then and subsequently." The Arlington Historical Society is proud to publish the winning essay below.]

Arlington: a Unionist Community in a Secessionist State

BY LYDIA CAWLEY

Arlington undeniably was a fulcrum between North and South. It was a dividing line between slavery and freedom, a line of defense for the nation's capital, and the home of Robert E. Lee. Despite its geographical proximity to the Confederacy, Arlington was ideologically distant from the Southern states and, throughout the Civil War, remained attached to the Union, both in military allegiance and in its cultural orientation. Arlington's divergences from its Southern neighbors were manifest from the beginning of the Civil War and continued well into the subsequent century.

Arlington's residents were anomalous in comparison to their neighbors due to their anti-slavery opinions and anti-secession views. Their response to secession opposed that of most other Virginians and Marylanders, who were loyal adherents to slavery. A clear example of this is Arlingtonians' differing reaction to federal troops. When the first three Union units crossed the Potomac and occupied Arlington, they encountered no physical opposition except from a smattering of picketers and settled in easily without violence or casualties.¹ In contrast, the Alexandrians—who in 1861 were fellow citizens of Arlingtonians in Alexandria County—countered the arrival of Union troops vehemently. One of their residents, innkeeper James W. Jackson made Col. Elmer Ellsworth² the first casualty of the Civil War, when he shot him down in the process of removing a Confederate flag from his local storefront. Marylanders, who were never formally citizens of the Confederacy, were just as hostile to the Union Army as Alexandrians. When the first Union soldiers, a Massachusetts brigade, were sent to defend Washington, they were met by violent civilian mobs in Baltimore³ and highly-publicized armed riots ensued.

Arlington was merely miles from these altercations, but its citizens were cut from a different, deep-Union-blue cloth. They weren't city-dwellers, tradesmen, slave auctioneers, or plantation owners (except of course for one Arlingtonian—the illustrious General Lee). Instead, they were small farmers. Their bucolic lifestyles and quaint acreages did not support slave ownership.⁴ This lack of extensive slave-holding in Arlington perhaps was the result of purely economic decisions about profitability, but it made Arlington culturally unique for Northern Virginia. The consequences of this local economic circumstance were far-reaching. Many of Arlington's newer residents settling in from the North were small farmers characterized by their anti-slavery and pro-Republican views.⁵ From the beginning of the War they asserted these beliefs, garnering over a two-thirds vote⁶ against the Ordinance of Secession issued shortly following the fall of Fort Sumter in 1861. After Lincoln's emancipation of Washington's slaves in 1862, and especially after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863,⁷ Union-occupied Arlington was a popular destination for freed slaves. They were treated fairly by residents and offered asylum in their homes, with even the Arlington House Plantation repurposed as a Freedmen's Village following the war.⁸ In these ways, Arlington remained a steadfast supporter of the Union and anti-slavery values and successfully withstood pressures to become a Confederate stronghold.

Arlington's demographic and social circumstances had a significant impact on the military course of the Civil War. Situated on a hill overlooking the Union's capital, Arlington was at least as important to the Union as adherence to the Union was to Arlingtonians. Rather than being the geographical tip of the Confederacy it turned out to be the tipping point for the Union. Arlington's security was crucial to the enduring military success of the Union. Just a month after the siege of Fort Sumter, Union troops' occupation of Arlington was essential to the defense of Washington. Within a few weeks, a loose network of several forts was established and Arlington was secured by the Army of the Potomac.⁹ Once the initial military threat to Washington (and Arlington) was over, Arlington properties became the base for vital day-to-day operations of the Army. The Arlington House, churches, and private homes served as hospitals, stables, headquarters, and barracks.¹⁰ The various fortifications fulfilled their purpose successfully, preventing direct attack from the Confederates. However, the safety of the area came with a price. Scattered encampments and trenches undermined farmland, restricting movement of people in and out of Washington and limiting the economic success of Arlington's residents. The lasting protection of Arlington, and subsequently Washington, was not the result of chance or military genius, but the dedication and sacrifice of local citizens' efforts, homes, and livelihoods to the preservation of the Union.

Arlington's background as an opponent of racism and ally of the nation's unification informs subsequent history. A little over 100 years after the Civil War, Arlington continued to distinguish itself as a progressive edge of the South. After 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision which enforced desegregation of schools, Virginia adhered to a backward campaign of "massive resistance,"¹¹ disobeying the Court. In the fashion of their predecessors, most citizens of Arlington County opted to uphold the rights of minorities and the rule of the national constitution. Just as Arlingtonians had asserted their unpopular position against secession in 1861, school board members voiced their dissent from the "Virginian position" of segregation. The Commonwealth General Assembly retaliated by prohibiting Arlington from electing its own School Board,¹² but this measure was temporary and could not impede Arlington's determination to integrate. By 1959, Arlington County became home to the first integrated school in Virginia (Stratford Elementary), "massive resistance" was declared unconstitutional,¹³ and the rest of the state started to follow suit. In the Civil War and the Civil Rights eras, Arlington was a tipping point for significant social change, defending progressive ideas in defiance of the standards of the Old South and pushing the country toward greater equality and unity.

Works Cited

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End Notes

- ¹ C.B. Rose, *Arlington County Virginia, a History* (Arlington Historical Society, 1976), 100.
 - ² Rose, 100
 - ³ Fred Albert Shannon, *The Organization and Administration of the Union Army, 1861-1865*, vol. 1 (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 28.
 - ⁴ Rose, 87.
 - ⁵ Richard H. Abbott, "Yankee Farmers in Northern Virginia 1840-1860", *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 76, no. 1 (1968): 76.
 - ⁶ Rose, 97.
 - ⁷ Sherman Pratt, *Arlington County, Virginia – a Modern History* (Arlington Historical Society, 1997), 26.
 - ⁸ Rose, 109.
 - ⁹ Pratt, 16.
 - ¹⁰ Ibid.
 - ¹¹ "Community Efforts to Improve Schools in Arlington County, Virginia", *Arlington Historical Magazine*, vol. 3, no. 76 (1966): 41-46.
 - ¹² Ibid.
 - ¹³ Cecilia Michelotti, "Arlington School Desegregation", *Arlington Historical Magazine*, vol. 8, no.4 (1988): 5-20.
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