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“The Union Forever”: Frederick, Maryland in the Elections of 1860 and 1864

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“The Union Forever”: Frederick, Maryland in the Elections of 1860 and 1864

Abstract

Frederick, Maryland has been remembered as a bastion of Unionist sentiment during the Civil War. However, in the Election of 1860, on the eve of the nation's internal conflict, a large portion of the city's 8,000 residents voted for a secessionist candidate. The Election of 1860 is famous for straying from the typical bi-partisan election; four candidates ran for office and each appealed to different political sentiments. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Frederick Maryland, Election of 1860, Election of 1864, Union, Southern Democrat, Republican, Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, John Breckenridge

Disciplines

American Politics | History | Military History | Political History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“The Union Forever”: Frederick, Maryland in the Elections of 1860 and 1864

May 2, 2016

By Megan McNish '16

Frederick, Maryland has been remembered as a bastion of Unionist sentiment during the Civil War. However, in the Election of 1860, on the eve of the nation’s internal conflict, a large portion of the city’s 8,000 residents voted for a secessionist candidate. The Election of 1860 is famous for straying from the typical bi-partisan election; four candidates ran for office and each appealed to different political sentiments. John Bell and Stephen A. Douglas were the two moderate candidates, while Abraham Lincoln and John C. Breckenridge were on the extremes of the political spectrum. Lincoln, running on the Republican ticket, was by far the most politically progressive candidate with his desire to limit the expansion of slavery. Stephen A. Douglas, a Northern Democrat, was also progressive but was a more moderate candidate with his desire for popular sovereignty, the principle of allowing new states to decide if they would open to slavery. John Bell, like Douglas, was also a moderate candidate who had his regional loyalties. Bell ran on the Constitutional Union ticket but was pro-South in his political leanings. Finally, John Breckenridge was an extreme candidate who supported Southern causes almost exclusively. Breckenridge was the Southern Democrat candidate, a byproduct of the fissure that had developed in the party over the issue of slavery. Voting for Breckenridge was a mere assertion for Southern causes.

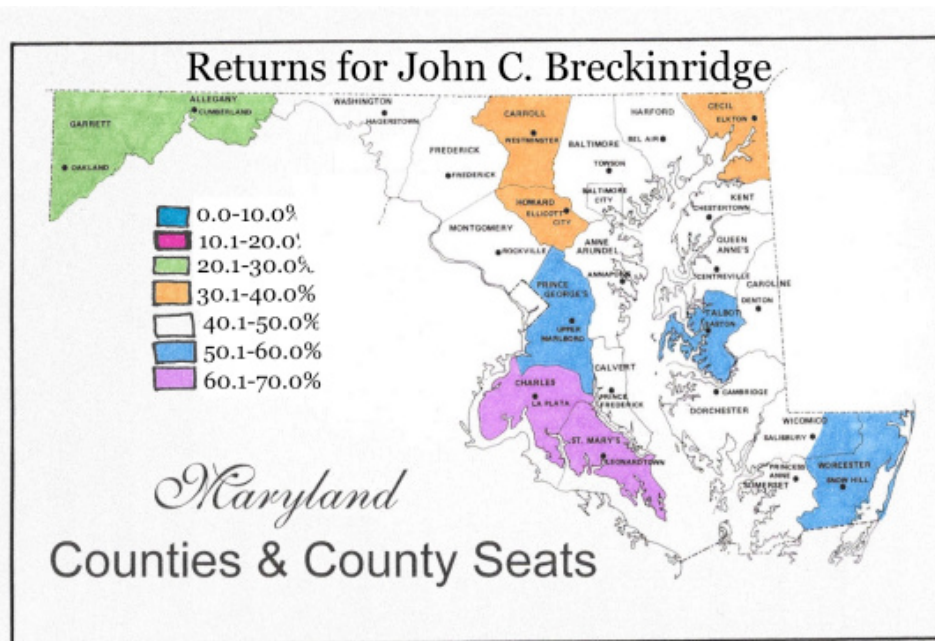


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Across the nation, these four candidates split the vote and prevented any candidate from holding a majority of the vote. How did that play out in Frederick? If you look at the election returns for Frederick County in 1860 it becomes immediately apparent that Southern candidates were by far the most popular. John Bell and John Breckenridge together took over 90% of the popular vote in the county. It would appear that Frederick did not align itself with Northern issues, despite the fact that Frederick lies along the Maryland/Pennsylvania border, and that Frederick's vote was a ringing endorsement for Southern candidates. In fact, John Bell missed a simple majority in the county by 0.7%. What is more interesting about the returns for Frederick County in 1860 is that John C. Breckenridge took 43.2% of the popular vote. By voting for Breckenridge, forty-three percent of the population signified they were willing to pull out of the Union. If Frederick were the Unionist haven that it has been known as, then the county would have been expected to vote for either John Bell or Stephen Douglas. While a large portion of the population did vote for Bell it was Breckenridge, rather than Douglas, who was just behind Bell in the polls. Does this suggest that Frederick's Unionism was based more in myth than in fact?

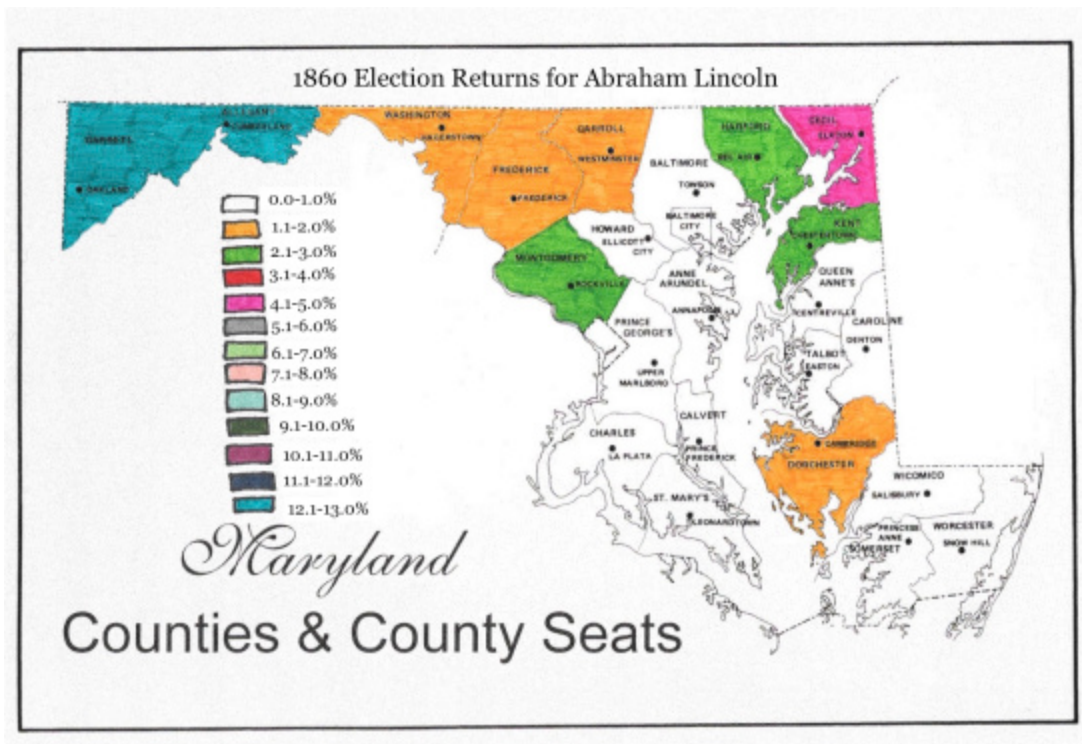


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While the Election of 1860 suggested that Frederick might not be as pro-Union as previously thought, the Election of 1864 tells a very different story. In the Election of 1864 there were just two candidates, Abraham Lincoln running on the Republican ticket and former General George B. McClellan running on the Democrat ticket. Voting for Lincoln in that election was a vote to continue the war, while a vote for McClellan was a vote to end the war with negotiated peace with the South. Due to Frederick's significant preference for Southern candidates in 1860, one would expect McClellan would be the most popular candidate. However, it was Lincoln who garnered the most votes in Frederick in 1864. In fact, he took 60% of votes in the county. How did this happen? What caused such a significant change in Frederick that allowed Abraham Lincoln and the fight to preserve the Union to become the favored cause in the Election of 1864?

One explanation that may account for this shift is Frederick's experience with war. Beginning with the start of war in 1861, Union troops frequently moved through Frederick, but in 1862, both the Union and Confederate

Armies marched through the city of Frederick on their way to the Battle of Antietam in nearby Sharpsburg. The movement of the armies towards battle left the city of Frederick relatively unscathed, but their return home was a different story. One diarist and constant Union supporter, Jacob Engelbrecht, recorded in his diary what the city was like in the aftermath of Antietam. “There are now 22 hospitals in our city,” he wrote on October 27, 1862, more than a month after the battle came to an end. These wounded soldiers changed how residents of Frederick saw the war. It also forced them to confront the costs of war in a way they had never imagined in 1860. Additionally, in the summer of 1864, just before the citizens of Frederick went to the polls, war came to their doorsteps in a new way. In July the Battle of Monocacy was fought on the outskirts of the city of Frederick. Jubal Early, the infamous Confederate general, ransomed the city for a hefty price of \$200,000. The Battle of Monocacy also left over 2,000 casualties in the fields on the outside of town. These were the memories fresh in the minds of the men who went to the polls in 1864.

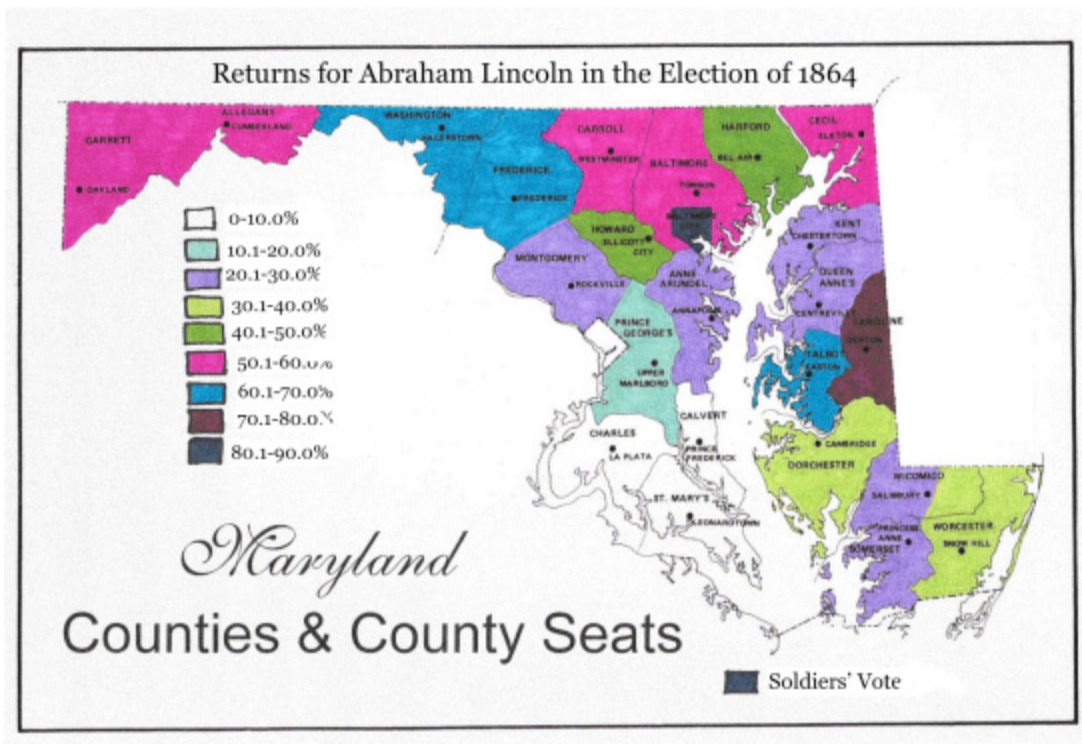


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“Whatever is the final issue, I say come weal or woe come life or death we go for the Union of the states forever one and inseparable,” Jacob Engelbrecht wrote on July 11, 1864 after the Battle of Monocacy. While Engelbrecht was always a Union man, there were many others in Frederick County who agreed with him when they went to the polls and voted for Lincoln in 1864. There will never be a way to say for certain what caused the change of sentiment in every person who voted for Lincoln in 1864. Regardless, there was a significant change in Frederick in the four years between the two elections. Although Frederick did not start out as a bastion of Unionism, the cause gained support during the ensuing years of war. While the historiography of Frederick is not entirely incorrect in stating that county supported the Unionist cause during the Civil War, this flat statement lacks the nuance of the history.

For more on Unionism in Frederick, MD, check out the author’s [recently published article](#) in the *Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era*.

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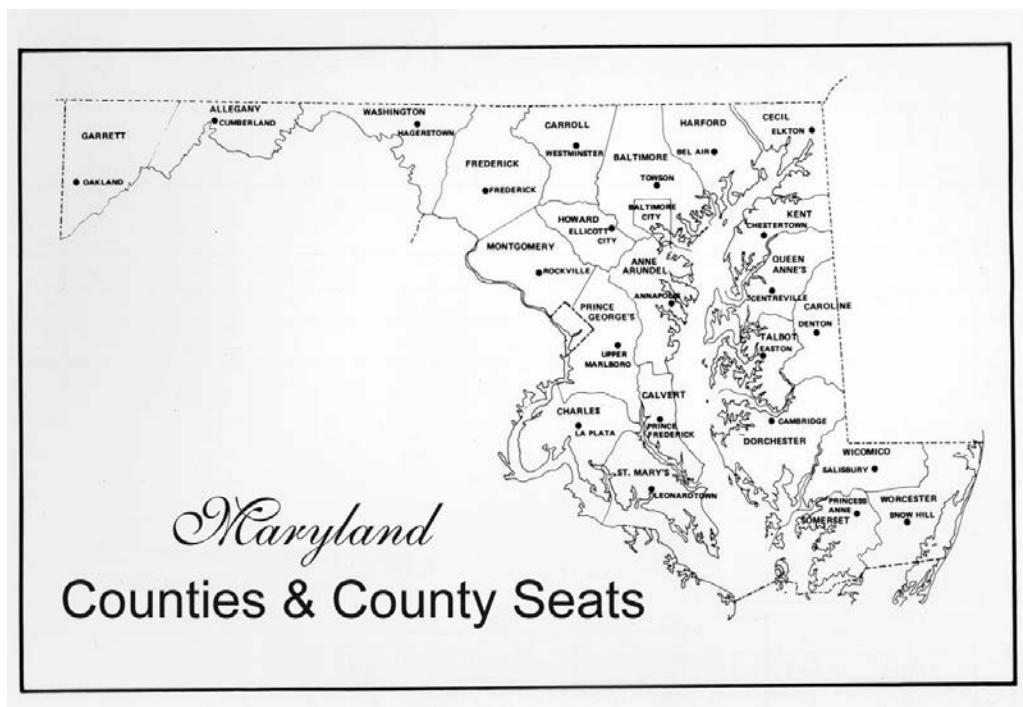
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