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A City Divided: Cosmo Mackenzie and Baltimore on the Eve of Civil War

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A City Divided: Cosmo Mackenzie and Baltimore on the Eve of Civil War

Abstract
Baltimore was a city of 215,000 inhabitants on the eve of the Civil War: 215,000 souls who would soon be torn by conflicting loyalties. One of these individuals, Cosmo Mackenzie, sat down on the evening of April 12, 1861, to write a letter to his brother, Collin. Despite the rainfall all day in Baltimore, Cosmo proclaimed “the war has opened at last and all is excitement here.” Throughout the city, Baltimoreans found themselves choosing between their identities as citizens of the Union and supporters of a Southern, slave-based society.

Keywords
Baltimore MD, Border States, Secession

Disciplines
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Comments
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Baltimore was a city of 215,000 inhabitants on the eve of the Civil War: 215,000 souls who would soon be torn by conflicting loyalties. One of these individuals, Cosmo Mackenzie, sat down on the evening of April 12, 1861, to write a letter to his brother, Collin. Despite the rainfall all day in Baltimore, Cosmo proclaimed “the war has opened at last and all is excitement here.” Throughout the city, Baltimoreans found themselves choosing between their identities as citizens of the Union and supporters of a Southern, slave-based society.

Not only Baltimore, but the entirety of Maryland found itself divided between Northern and Southern sympathies. George William Brown, the Mayor of Baltimore at the time stated that “Her [Maryland’s] loyalties were divided between the North and the South, with a decided preponderance on the Southern side.” But in which category did Cosmo belong? The fervently pro-Secessionist letterhead atop the paper seems to indicate the latter. The wording of the letter itself, however, may suggest otherwise. “I send you on this a sample of the ‘Secession Flag’ – you will see it looks a little like our Star Spangled Banner”. An ardent secessionist would not include the possessive “our” in mentioning the American flag. However, when one looks a little further into the letter, we see that Cosmo Mackenzie seemed angered by the fact that the bombardment of Fort Sumter happened at all. “Had Lincoln taken the advice of General Scott all this would have been prevented,” Mackenzie declares in reference to the advice offered that the installation be left to Confederate forces. Cosmo’s misgivings towards Lincoln were far from unique in Maryland: 2,294 out of 92,502 total votes – just shy of 2.5% — were cast for Lincoln in the state.
Cosmo Mackenzie seems to have been a Conservative Unionist. Although the city favored the new Confederacy according to Mayor Brown, Cosmo was far from alone. Much of Baltimore agreed with Mr. Mackenzie’s sentiments at the ballot box in 1860, as nearly one-half of the votes cast in Baltimore were for John Bell and the Constitutional Union Party. This party pledged, above all, adherence to the Constitution over sectional lines. Although slightly over 2,000 more votes were cast for John C. Breckenridge and the Southern Democrats, both parties held their conventions in Baltimore. Breckenridge and many of the Southern Democrats ultimately swore allegiance to the Confederacy, though the widespread support of John Bell – who would shock Unionists in aligning himself with the Confederacy in late April of 1861 – would indicate that a substantial conservative pro-Union base also existed in Baltimore.

Cosmo’s chief concern with the impending conflict, in fact, was the effect that the war would have on his business. Unfortunately, neither his letter nor the Census of 1860 records give any detail on what exactly his business was. The Census of 1870, however, lists Cosmo as a hardware merchant. Provided this was also his business in 1861, Cosmo found himself perched between the increasingly industrial North and the agricultural forces predominant in the South. Of course, the Northern states were still largely agricultural as well, but there was a shortage throughout the South of industrial facilities with which to mass produce tools for use on farms and plantations. Thus, like countless
other Baltimore-based merchants, Cosmo found himself quite literally wedged between two radically different worldviews.

Within three days of Cosmo’s letter, President Lincoln called for 75,000 troops to put down the Rebellion. This event, Mayor George Brown recalled, only bred further tensions within the population of Baltimore. On April 17, Mayor Brown urged the population to avoid provoking violence and to render aid to authorities if violence did erupt. The following day, some Federal troops passed through Baltimore, prompting a group of citizens known as the States’ Rights Conventions to adopt a series of resolutions, one of which promised: “to repel, if need be, any invader who may come to establish a military despotism over us.” On April 19, the Sixth Massachusetts Infantry passed through the city, eliciting the reaction promised by the pro-Confederate citizenry. In what became known as the Pratt Street Riot, elements of the Baltimore police and several companies of soldiers found themselves assaulted by bricks and stones. As rioters attempted to seize the troops’ muskets, the soldiers opened fire. By the time the beleaguered soldiers made their way out of the city, eight rioters and three soldiers were dead; an additional twenty-four soldiers were wounded.

Over the course of the war, thousands of Baltimoreans found themselves facing one another. The breakdown of the democratic process, first seen by the residents of Baltimore on the evening of April 19, 1861, was complete. Unfortunately, we are left to wonder what Cosmo ultimately did during the conflict, though he no doubt saw friends and family take up arms on opposite sides, killing and being killed for what they held dear. Indeed, Cosmo found himself a resident one morning of a principal port of the United States, the next, a hotbed of sectional divisions.

Sources


