

# ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



## December 2023 Edition

ACRP Friends,

We hope this year end newsletter finds you well. In this December newsletter, we have taken a deep dive into an aspect of our history that provides context to the lynchings of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas, as well as to current events. The focus is on the Snowden family who ran and edited today's Alexandria Gazette, while also serving in local and state politics, from 1800 until 1911. The first part of this two-part series follows some important year-end announcements.

### In The News

The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project and the Scholarship Fund of Alexandria are raising money for two \$3,000 scholarships in the names of Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas to be awarded to two African American Alexandria City High School students in 2024. Please consider making a donation as part of your year-end giving by going to our SFA campaign page: [Support the Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas Scholarship](#). Another way to support the scholarship program is to purchase a ticket to one of the upcoming Tables of Conscience Dinners being held on January 13, February 3, and February 10, 2024.

### Tables of Conscience Dinners

*Saturdays from 6-9 p.m. on January 13, February 3, and February 10, 2024*  
*Tickets \$125*

We are excited to announce a new round of [Tables of Conscience](#) book-themed dinners. Three ACRP Members have volunteered to host dinners in their homes for 8-12 people from 6-9 p.m. Those interested in attending should select one of the books listed and buy a ticket through the Office of Historic Alexandria's online ticket system by clicking on the dates below. About a week before the dinner, ticket holders will receive an email with the name and address of the hosts. These dinners are a great way to get to know other ACRP members better while having meaningful conversations about important social justice issues.

#### [January 13](#)

Book: *Slavery By Another Name, the Reenslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II,*

By Douglas A. Blackmon

### [February 3](#)

Book: *It's the Little Things, Everyday Interactions that Anger, Annoy and Divide the Races*, By Lena Williams

### [February 10](#)

Book: *The Half That Has Never Been Told: Slavery and American Capitalism*, by Edward E. Baptist

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## Upcoming Events

### ACRP Winter Program and Book Signing

#### Featuring *In the Pines* with Author Grace Elizabeth Hale

Saturday, January 27, 2024 1 - 3 p.m.

Alexandria History Museum at the Lyceum

Free and open to the public, register [here](#).

Author and University of Virginia Commonwealth Professor of American Studies and History Grace Elizabeth Hale will discuss her latest book, *In the Pines: A Lynching, A Lie, A Reckoning*. Part history and part memoir, *In the Pines* tells the story of the 1947 lynching of Versie Johnson who had been accused of raping a white woman and was being held in the Piney Woods jail by Hale's grandfather, who was the sheriff. Family lore held up her grandfather for preventing a lynch mob from killing Johnson. In what has been described as a "profound act of narrative repair," Hale reveals that Johnson was not killed while trying to escape and her grandfather did not save him - her Beloved Grandfather and her family had lied. Hale unravels the truth of what happened in a small Mississippi town and reckons with a very personal connection to a history of racial terror and injustice to set the record straight and kill the lies that sustain racism. Books available for purchase and signing at the event.

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*Trigger Warning:* There is a letter transcribed in the 1850s section of this research about the possible sale of an enslaved family. It is difficult to read.

## The Snowden Family: Producers of their Time

For more than a century, the Snowden family owned and published an influential newspaper in Alexandria, VA. Their views became the dominant narrative of this city's history beginning in 1800 and continuing through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of the Jim Crow Era. During that time, the family supported slavery until its bitter end and then fought to stop African Americans from obtaining civil, economic, and social rights while normalizing white supremacy.

From its start, the paper was intimately tied to those in power, and by the late 1830s the family was both governing Alexandria and covering the news. From the beginning, it was difficult to distinguish the political views held by Snowden & Sons from those held by Alexandria's elite. Samuel Snowden, like the majority of the City Council, was a Federalist supporting the ideals of the revolution as they applied to white men. Later, Snowden's son Edgar joined city leaders as a Whig, promoting protective tariffs and federal investment in infrastructure. In the 1850s, with Alexandria back in Virginia's fold, Edgar flirted with the Know Nothing nativist party followed by the Constitutional Unionist Party, but ultimately supported Alexandria's rebellious vote to secede. After the war, Edgar and his sons who succeeded him again reflected Alexandria's white leadership - espousing the views of Conservative and Democratic politics. In short, they held a white supremacist interpretation of the world.

The same was true with their religious beliefs. Samuel Snowden was a Quaker and his wife was a Methodist Episcopalian. They likely raised their only son Edgar at Trinity Methodist Church, but he eventually joined Christ Church Episcopal where the wealthy and powerful congregated.

During Samuel's tenure, the newspaper was connected to city government through family and business partners. When Edgar took the reins around 1830, he became involved in the actual governing of Alexandria. By the time Edgar's three sons - Edgar Jr., Harold, and Hubert - were at the helm, the Snowdens were simultaneously in charge of city government and the newspaper. This not only gave them tremendous influence and control over Alexandria's affairs, but also how they were presented to the public and recorded in history. In sum, for a total of more than 50 years there was a Snowden in office and a Snowden editing the

paper. During all that time, the viewpoints of Alexandrians who were not protestant, pro-business, pro-development, wealthy or white, were ignored. There was no first draft of history that included Alexandria's African Americans, yet their lives were at the center of everything.

## **Part 1: From Slavery to War 1800-1860**

### **The Early Years 1800-1830**

An indelible dye was cast in 1790 when Virginia's Thomas Jefferson and James Madison struck a deal to locate the new nation's capital on the banks of two Potomac slave holding states. Their hope, to hem in the Northern powers threatening to undermine slavery by exchanging debt forgiveness for 20 square miles of Virginia, and 70 of Maryland, left a deep dark stain on the pages of Alexandria's history. "By placing the seat of government firmly in the South, this legislation allowed slavery to flourish in the new capital" of which Alexandria was a part.[1]

By the last decades of the 18th century, the town of Alexandria was prospering, Northern Virginia farmers were shifting away from labor intensive tobacco to grain and the merchants and shippers were following suit, freeing up plenty of enslaved people to be rented out to build the new capital. By the time white legislators and their enterprisers arrived in the new District in 1800, the enslaved made up a quarter of the new territory's population and were engaged in every kind of labor and service.

In anticipation of Congress's arrival and the November 17, 1800 opening of the first legislative session in the new federal district, a number of newspapers set up press offices. Mathew Brown, of Yundt & Brown, was among those who wanted to publish a Federalist paper in the new capital, so he contacted a young printer who was working for his company in Alexandria, D.C. - his name was Samuel Snowden. In July, 1800, the two became partners. [2]

The duo planned to publish daily while Congress was in session and three days a week when out of session. They hired a reporter to be their correspondent in the capitol building and on November 24, moved their press into an office in Alexandria. Four days later they bought their competition - William Fowler's *Columbian Mirror* and *Alexandria Gazette* - gaining an additional printing press and Fowler's subscribers in the counties of Alexandria, Prince George, Charles and St. Mary's. On December 8, 1800 the inaugural issue of the *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer* was published from a room above Washington Tavern on King Street.[3]

### **An Inconvenient Faith**

When Samuel Snowden, a Quaker originally from Piscataway, New Jersey, arrived in Alexandria, the town had more than [5,900 residents, 1,172 of whom were enslaved and 383 who were Black and free](#). There were already a number of successful and influential Quaker merchants, bankers and property owners living in the town. Snowden joined them at the Alexandria meeting, his faith offering another good connection to the young printer.

But the Alexandria Friends were conflicted over slavery. "In the years during and after the American Revolution, the Quaker faith gave rise to beliefs and practices, including opposition to slavery, that increasingly placed Quakers outside the mainstream of southern life. Nonetheless, Quakers throughout northern Virginia...remained part of the southern economy and society, a society increasingly committed to slavery. As a result, their worldly endeavors required many to compromise, or at least limit the application of their religious principles." The ubiquitous use of the enslaved in Alexandria made it impossible to avoid it and stay in business. Some of the Quakers rented enslaved workers and some owned slaves outright. [4]

Early on, Brown and Snowden used enslaved labor to print the paper. James Butler, an enslaved Black 15-year-old, escaped in 1801 while working as a pressman for them.

In 1803, Snowden wrote that the institution of slavery was 'an inveterate cancer' in society.

Still, Snowden continued to use slave labor at his press as evidenced by a 1813 "ran away" notice for Gusavus Reed Porter. [At the time Porter escaped, the country was at war with Britain, and the enslaved who reached the British could gain their freedom](#). Snowden didn't show much interest in finding Porter who "absconded" in May as evidenced by the fact that he didn't publish an ad about Porter until August. Snowden offered a reward of only one cent and wrote "his clothing cannot be described, as he has changed it several times since he left. The above reward, but no charges will be paid for apprehending and delivering him." [5]

Between 1774 and 1804 most northern states abolished or began phasing out slavery. In 1808, Congress made the international slave trade illegal and the domestic slave trade, of which Alexandria would become an epicenter, began to prosper. In 1810, enslaved people made up 20 percent of Alexandria's population increasing the pressure on Alexandria's Quakers.

Snowden, like others of his faith, offered to be legal witnesses at manumissions. He played such a role at the [1811 manumission of Daniel Botts and when George Parker liberated his family in 1814.](#)

In 1816, Alexandria Quaker and Merchant William Hartshorne challenged his brothers to disentangle from the slave economy. He documented that no current members owned slaves, and he encouraged them not to rent enslaved people either, indicating that some members were doing just that. [6]

The same year, a census listed Snowden as having one free Black person and one enslaved person living with him, however, in the 1820 census, both people are listed as free. Ten years later, the 1830 census listed two enslaved Black people in his household, an older female and a boy. It is likely that the older female was the same woman listed as a free Black ten years earlier and the boy may have been related to her.

While it is unclear whether Samuel Snowden continued to enslave people, he certainly participated in the slave economy furthering its effect by accepting and relying upon money from advertisers who rented, imprisoned, tortured, raped, coffled, shipped, and sold enslaved people.

"Negotiating between the spiritual demands of the sect and the economic and social life of a slave society was a difficult task that involved frequent compromises and accommodations," wrote [Glenn Crothers, in an article on Quaker Merchants in early Alexandria.](#)

Samuel remained active in the Quaker meetings as late as 1828, although he likely also attended Trinity Methodist Church after he married.

### **A Convenient Marriage**

On January 11, 1802, Samuel wed Nancy Longden, the daughter of John Longden, a prominent Federalist involved in Alexandria's politics and government. Longden, who was originally from Fairfax where he operated a large farm that used slave labor, fought alongside "Light Horse" Harry Lee during the Revolution. He moved to Alexandria around the same time as Snowden, with a pre-established reputation and political clout in the town, both of which became a boon for Snowden's business. [7]

"The support of that faction [government officials and merchants] was crucial to Snowden's survival in business, particularly during times of economic difficulty when his advertising revenues shrank," according to researcher David A. Rawson.

The following June (1802), Brown decided to sell his share of the business to Samuel, who signed a promissory note guaranteed by his wealthy father-in-law. In exchange for paying off his loans, Snowden gave Longden ownership over his Royal Street house and office, kitchen furniture and printing press. Still, decades of financial distress were in store for the young printer, who experienced one fiscal crisis after another.

- In 1807-1808, President Thomas Jefferson's embargo suspended American exports to Europe and the West Indies, closing the port of Alexandria and sinking Snowden's advertising dollars. Snowden had to sell his interest in the paper (but not his control) to an "anonymous individual" who bankrolled the publication until he could pick it up again. (The name changed to the *Alexandria Daily Gazette, Commercial & Political*, a little later *Daily* was removed from the title.) [8]
- When the war with Britain raged from 1812-1814 Alexandria's shipping industry came to a halt and threw the port town into an economic slump that lasted longer than the conflict. In 1812, Snowden partnered with Attorney John Douglass Simms, a prominent Federalist involved in town politics and the son of Col. Charles Simms who became Mayor of Alexandria in 1813. The fortuitous match resulted in the *Gazette* becoming the official record of government proceedings as "Printers to the Corporation of Alexandria." But, the honeymoon was cut short by the British invasion of Washington, D.C. in August 1814. The merchants pressured town leaders to strike a deal to spare the city with the ruthless British Naval Commander George Cockburn. The mayor, and several others met with Cockburn who agreed not to burn the town. His terms were harsh - demanding Alexandria give up all ammunition, shipping,

and merchandise that had been ready for export, as well as food and libations. The popularity of the Mayor, and by extension his son and the paper were sullied. [9]

- American tariffs against imported goods that started during the war and continued after it to protect manufacturing (mostly in the North), [plagued Alexandria's shipping and farming economy](#). Soon after, the Napoleonic wars ended and Europe lost her appetite for American grains. An economic panic followed in 1819.
- Another slow down forced Snowden to claim bankruptcy and On December 30, 1824, he shuttered the paper. But then, two days later, on January 1, 1825, Snowden and Capt. William F. Thornton, who led the Alexandria Dragoons in the War of 1812, published "a new and independent journal" he fittingly called the Phenix Gazette. By the end of Autumn Snowden was solvent again.

The mid-20s also saw new industry in Alexandria as T.W. Smith and Company opened a steam engine company and flour exports picked up again. Meanwhile, the north's prospering manufacturing economy was pushing ahead at breakneck speed.

"Left behind by northern economic development, Alexandria and northern Virginia retrenched and turned to more traditional economic practices - particularly, slavery and the slave trade. In the years after 1820, northern Virginia turned south, and the port of Alexandria stood at the center of this economic and cultural transformation," according to In the *Shadow of Freedom*, a book edited by Paul Finkelman and Donald Kennon. [10]

Enter Isaac Franklin and John Armfield, who have been nefariously credited with professionalizing the domestic slave trade. They used Alexandria, D.C. as their home base. These men bought up surplus slaves from throughout the region and sold them for a high profit as forced labor in the Deep South. In 1828, Armfield signed a multi-year lease at 1315 Duke Street and then, with address in hand, placed an ad in *The Phenix*.

Looking "to purchase one hundred and fifty likely young negroes of both sexes between the ages of 8 and 25 years," Armfield offered to pay higher prices than anyone else, "in the market, or that may hereafter come into market. FRANKLIN & ARMFIELD."

The advertisements ran in the paper the entire time they were in business. Appearing first in the Phenix and then in the Alexandria Gazette, the Snowdens acceptance of the business makes them, and the paper, complicit in the largest domestic slave trading business in the country.

### **Generational Wealth**

In 1827, Snowden bought out Thornton and named his only son Edgar, 17, as his partner.

In March 1830, John Longden died and left Edgar, 20, with the Royal Street house that held the newspaper's office and press. He paid all the paper's debts and handed over his interest in the business. Longden also gave his grandson an additional \$1,100 (equivalent of about \$37,000 today), his stock from the Bank of Alexandria, his large farm in Fairfax County (to be split with his other grandson Edgar Bentley and later go to the heirs of both), and an enslaved person named Roberts.[11]

According to another source, the Snowden & Son partnership was announced in June 1831, which would have been a few weeks before Samuel Snowden died of a "severe illness."

Regardless, upon his father's death on July 14, 1831, Edgar, nearly 21, became the sole owner, editor and publisher of the paper. Soon after, he renamed it the *Alexandria Gazette*.

Samuel Snowden was remembered by his white colleagues as a man of "integrity, generous heart, [and] cheerful temper" who didn't "deal in personalities" or "besmirch" the character of others.

Unlike his father, Edgar Snowden would start his professional life debt free and wealthy. Unburdened by unending financial travails, this pro-development Snowden could use the paper to build up the local economy and launch his political career as a pro-slavery Whig.

### **Growing Up in Alexandria**

In 1809, Henry "Lighthouse" Lee moved his family to Alexandria. His son, Robert E. Lee, was just a toddler at

the time, but he grew up attending Alexandria's storied schools. Edgar Snowden, born in 1810, was a few years Lee's junior. He, like Lee, attended the well respected Alexandria Academy on Wolfe Street. After that, their paths diverged, but only for a few years as Edgar would marry a close cousin of Lee's wife, Mary Ann Randolph Custis. Their children would be contemporaries and cousins. Both families attended Christ Church Episcopal. [12]

At the age of 15, Snowden started studying law at Columbia College in Washington City. By 1827, he returned to Alexandria and was studying with a local attorney and writing for his father's newspaper.

Edgar Snowden passed the bar and was planning to practice law when he married Louisa Jayne Grimes in April 1831 - just two months before Samuel Snowden died. Louisa, the daughter of Benjamin Grymes, had grown up in a wealthy King Georges County planter family that used forced labor to grow their wealth.

Over the course of their marriage, Edgar and Louisa had eleven children, three of whom would run the paper until 1911, they were Edgar Jr., Harold and Hubert.

## 1830s

### Rising Star

Edgar Snowden was a well educated, talented writer and orator and by 1835, the 25-year-old newspaper publisher was a member of the Common Council. He served for five years, followed by a stint as Mayor of Alexandria from 1840-1843, a position he used together with his paper to launch a citywide campaign to retrocede from the District of Columbia. It took almost a decade, but once the town was safely in Virginia's fold, Snowden went to Richmond to represent Alexandria.

"As early as September 1831, he was drafting resolutions and making speeches against [President] Jackson's reelection. At a [Henry] Clay meeting about a year later, his recital of abuses of Jackson's administration was described as "acoustic yet dignified" and his eulogy of Clay as "beautiful." [13]

*The Alexandria Gazette's* popularity in this whig dominated town had a lot to do with Snowden's like-mindedness and his ability to frame their point of view in ink. Snowden's chief desire was to improve and expand Alexandria's economy. He threw his support behind the establishment of the Alexandria Canal Company, both in print, on the Common Council, and from his own pocket. He served as its President for more than one term. He railed against antibank Democrats in Congress who threatened the bank's charters after The Bank of Maryland's 1834 failure caused the Bank of Alexandria, in which he held shares, to fail. He lobbied for a cotton mill in Alexandria, an industry dependent upon slave labor, from which he believed the town would profit. It took more than a decade to come to fruition, but in 1847 the Mount Vernon Cotton Factory opened its doors.

### Slavery & Economy

There were always voices in Alexandria that spoke out against enslavement, but none were as loud or as preferred as the *Alexandria Gazette* that defended slavery. By 1816, the Quakers were attempting to address their relationship with slavery. Members of Trinity Methodist Church were becoming more conflicted on the issue. The respected Quaker educator Benjamin Hallowell set up a Benevolent Society that circulated petitions in town and sent letters to the *Gazette* advocating for abolition in the District of Columbia. But after Nat Turner's Virginia Rebellion in August 1831, the groups grew quiet and disbanded as hostility settled over the town that even a loyalty pledge by leaders of the Black community could not persuade. [14]

Turner's rebellion happened within weeks of Samuel's death and Edgar's ascension at the paper. He eagerly weighed in on the violent rebellion invoking the supremacy of white men and their divine right and obligation to be masters of Black people.

Snowden, an enslaver himself, clearly had no qualms with slavery, but it is striking how ardently and vociferously he protected Alexandria's right to own and trade slaves.

By 1833, he had established an unmovable opposition to abolition and emancipation. Slavery, was, according to Edgar Snowden, a southern matter to be discussed only by those who own other human beings, like himself. The trained attorney frequently argued that the framers of the constitution dealt with the question of slavery at the nation's founding, in other words, it was settled law. [15]

There continued to be prominent voices exposing the immoral inhumanity of slavery and challenging his

rhetoric. In 1833, Great Britain abolished slavery and the same year the American Anti-Slavery Society, led by William Lloyd Garrison, was born. Garrison, a Boston journalist, published *The Liberator*, a newspaper that exposed the horrors of southern slavery.

At the same time, abolitionists continued to petition Congress to end slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia, striking at the heart of Alexandria's economy. (Besides Franklin and Armfeld, Bruin and Moncure Conway traded enslaved and Alexandria's Marine Insurance Company shipped them to Charleston, S.C., New Orleans and Natchez, Miss.) The abolitionist plan to "overwhelm Congress" by burying them in petitions caused an unusual coalition to develop in Alexandria. Pro-bank and pro-development Whigs, joined up with pro-slavery Quaker Merchants and planters, as well as slaveholding businesses and local slave traders. *The Alexandria Gazette* became the mouthpiece of the new unlikely united front.[16]

After an 1835 visit to the North, Snowden tried to downplay antislavery concerns, writing on September 16, "The vast majority of Northern people conscientiously believe slavery to be a great evil; but they also believe it is an evil which does not affect them - with which they can and ought to have nothing to do - and which their interest would prevent them from meddling...the intelligent and educated are with us. The South from principle and a knowledge of the true state and conditions of things, the trading classes are with us from motives of policy and interest; and the laboring classes are on the same side from a natural hatred engendered towards the other color, in consequence of interference with their business and occupations....You will find [Arthur] Tappan and Garrison, and their co-laborers denounced wherever you go."

Snowden constantly attacked Garrison and to a lesser extent Tappan in the pages of the *Gazette*, at one point, he invited the duo to visit Alexandria, "all but promising they would be hanged forthwith. Lynching was a perfectly respectable business in his eyes," according to Jefferson Morley, who wrote an account of an 1835 race riot in Washington, D.C.

"We hope they will not slight nor neglect this invitation," Snowden continued with his hardly veiled threat, "it is given in much sincerity, and with a perfect knowledge, from recent observation, of the state of Southern Feeling." [17]

In 1836, Congress reacted to the deluge of petitions by instituting a gag rule that forced the immediate tabling of slavery petitions. But Congressman and former U.S. President John Q. Adams, took up the cause of Free Speech and persistently fought the stifling rule, bringing him into Snowden's crosshairs and becoming the pressman's enemy.

## 1840s

In 1839, Snowden moved his growing family and four Black women whom he enslaved into a large brick house at the far end of Water Street. By the Spring, local Whigs were fed up with the way Congress was toying with Bank charters. In April, Snowden took politicians to task for political quackery and "experiments in legislation" that were against the people's wishes. Construction on the Alexandria Canal was finally done in '43, but it left the City heavily in debt, spending Snowden and the council had approved. By the time it was operational, the canal's economic usefulness was basically eclipsed by the success of the Baltimore & Ohio railroad.[18]

The white population stagnated while the Free Black population grew, making up 20 percent of Alexandria's population. Throughout the decade of the '40s, the voice of the abolitionists gained strength. In 1844, Trinity Methodist came out against slavery. In reply, pro-slavery members started [Washington Street] Methodist Church of the South, others went to Christ Church. Slavery divided the Baptists as well and fed the campaign to retrocede from Washington, D.C. [19]

On the 6th of March, 1840, Edgar Snowden was elected by the members of the Common Council to be the Mayor of Alexandria. His copious home became the nucleus of political life in Alexandria. There he hosted entertaining salons with Senators, Congressmen, mayors and military leaders. The events were detailed in the pages of the *Gazette*, most likely by him, or at least edited by him. Snowden joined Alexandria's Masons and Louisa became vice president of the local lady Whigs. [20]

While he was mayor, Snowden's feud over the gag rule with John Q. Adams continued. "Respect for Adam's age, service, and talents will not prevent us," Snowden wrote, "from speaking of his malignant and incendiary conduct." Four days later, he spewed, "the nation is cursed with John Quincy Adams and his abolition petitions!"

By 1842, the Common Council was lobbying Congress to amend the town charter and allow the office of mayor to be elected directly by the public. Congress controlled the federal district and could engage in experiments, such as rechartering, or not rechartering banks, and abolishing slavery, so when a bill to allow direct voting for the mayor came to the House floor, Rep. Adams amended it to give all residents of Alexandria the vote - even Free Black men. [21]

Snowden and town leaders were not amused. They had not endeared themselves to Alexandria's Black community. In 1837, while Snowden was a Councilman, the town revoked the right of Black people to gather even "[under the pretense or pretext of a religious meeting, or for any amusement.](#)" Alexandria had a long history of educating Black children, but officials used the ordinance to harass teachers and students alike.

Adam's measure didn't get more than a few minutes of floor time, but it definitely upset Southern Congressmen who slung sharp words at him. Snowden responded in the *Gazette*, "northern people" have no right to "interfere in our domestic matters."

In the final version of the law, the word white appeared in front of residents and on March 7, 1843, white Alexandrians directly elected their mayor - Robert G. Violett.

At the end of 1844, the House booted the gag order and antislavery legislation was once again open for debate in the halls of Congress. "For slaveholders in the district the petition campaign and ensuing debate was an ominous development, posing a direct threat to their property and what they believed were their constitutional rights. In Alexandria, Edgar Snowden publicly voiced anger and worry of the towns elite in the pages of the *Gazette*." [22]

### **The Campaign for Retrocession & Sectional Crisis**

Ever since becoming part of the federal district, Alexandrians had a recurring debate over whether to return to Virginia. Thompson Mason led a campaign to retrocede in 1824, but a merchant group thwarted his efforts. Another attempt was made in 1832, but it also fizzled. It was not until October 12, 1840 that residents of Alexandria town voted overwhelmingly for retrocession (666-211), although it did not go over well in the county. That same month, more than 40 Alexandrians, Snowden among them, attended a Whig meeting in Richmond where they unfurled a pro-Harrison flag the other side of which called for retrocession with the slogan, "Our Revolutionary Fathers Intended Us To Be Free Sons Of Virginia, Will You See Us Slaves?"

All of the Commonwealth's policies were geared toward protecting the institution of slavery, and the Free Black community did not want to leave the District. Virginia forced Free Blacks to leave the state or risk being enslaved, but in the District they had accumulated some small liberties. Without the right to vote, Alexandria's Black community was left at the mercy of the white men.

An extensive debate was published in the *Gazette* prior to the vote. Proponents spoke about their desire to be able to vote in national elections and be represented in Congress. But they also moaned about the local economy, a lack of Congressional support and, more importantly, the threat to their property.

Most historians who have written about the retrocession decision have focused on voting rights, Alexandria's debt problem, and the treatment of local banks as the reasons for white townsmen's support. More recently, Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon have placed the protection of slavery at the "heart of the campaign, which was led, both locally and in Congress by men deeply invested in the slave economy and culture of the district and the South." Southern Congressmen became passionate advocates for Alexandria in their all out effort to stop abolitionist and preserve the slave trade.

In town, Alexandria's "leading advocate" Snowden, wrote that the District had become "a mere colony of dispirited idlers and emancipated slaves." He called out the "political fanatics in Congress" in his rants against abolition.

Prior to the retrocession vote, the *Gazette* published columns of letters, a number of which identify slavery as a primary issue. One writer argued that Alexandrians right to hold "at least one important species of property" was hanging by a thread. Another asked, "Who doubts but that if this consideration did not interpose, the institution of slavery would be instantly abolished, without reference to the views or interests of the people of the District?" [24]

Slavery was the "crux of the issue," according to Finkelman and Kennon, who wrote that "if banks were subject to Congressional "experiments," so too were other types of property, including slaves. While the two agreed there were locals who wanted retrocession for other reasons, they claim the "symbolic significance of



the District and the hardening of the border between slavery and freedom during the sectional crisis of the 1840s and 1850s transformed a campaign to protect local interests (including slavery) into part of the larger national struggle over the future of slavery in the United States. What is striking is how rarely historians of the broader sectional conflict, the slave trade, and even the conflict over slavery in the middle ground between slavery and freedom, have recognized the significance of Alexandria's retrocession." [25]

In July 1846, Congress granted Alexandria's petition and after a referendum confirmed the local wish to retrocede (763-222), the county was annexed by Virginia. Alexandria's Black Community - who could not vote on the measure - were left to endure loud displays of triumphalism while their white neighbors fired up bonfires and marched through the streets. A number of Free Black families who had the means to move left, reducing Alexandria's Black population.

Subsequently, Edgar Snowden was elected to represent the area in the General Assembly on December 17, 1847 where he served until 1853, much to the disgruntlement of the Western delegates who were not pro-slavery.

### **The 1850s**

Good things started happening for Alexandria's economy once she threw her lot in with the South. The State stepped in to help with the canal debt and when Congress outlawed the slave trade in the District, all the business moved to the Alexandria. Snowden ran for Congress in 1853 and again in 1857 losing both times to the same candidate. His son, Edgar Jr., had started writing for the *Gazette* during his second Congressional run in an effort to keep the content separate from his campaign. By the end of the 1850s, the two Edgars were working side-by-side, Edgar Sr. remaining the intellectual, while his junior brought humor and wit to the publication.

Snowden had little to say about the enslaved who attempted to escape on the Pearl in 1848, but he did call it the "most daring and high handed attempt of the kind" and advocated for a punishment that will prevent anyone from trying to runaway again.[26]

As the North and South fought over the western territorial spoils from the Mexican War, Snowden continued to fight back and attack abolitionists, such as Arthur Tappan, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Philips and John Q. Adams, writing,

"From personal denunciation the abolitionists had the audacity to proceed to legislative hostility; and, emboldened by success, they have finally invoked the aid of Congress to carry out their nefarious schemes. With pharisaical professions of purity, they denounce slavery as a sin and a crime — with simulated contrition they reproach themselves for its existence in States where they do not reside, while they trample the constitution under foot and spurn the rites of Christianity. Laboring under purient sentimentalism, they scorn the rights of the whites in their pretended love fro the blacks; they aid the negro to escape from his master, or invite him to insurrection; and finally, they have trumpeted forth a device, known as the Wilmot Proviso, not only to stigmatize slavery, but to exclude it form the territory of the nation, as a deadly leprosy which would infect with plague free soil which has been held for a hundred years by Mexican ladrones, happy and contented with the hideous servitude of peons. The abolitionists persist in these things with a blind and dangerous assiduity; and they threaten the permanency of the Union, if their insane demands are not assented to. The end of this is clear, if fanaticism is not stifled and crushed at once and forever. Slavery must be branded, and the slave States must submit patiently, while a badge of inferiority is fixed upon them; otherwise, abolitionism declares that it will dissolve the Union. We have not made these statements at random. They are true, and the world knows them to be true, and in making these statements we have pointed out the source of all the dangers which menace the Union. [27]

In the end, Snowden supported Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850 that strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act by forcing free states to capture and return those who had escaped, and left it up to each new state to decide whether to be free or not. But, the making of the deal brought on such aggressive rhetoric that it left the nation polarized.

In 1853, Edgar Snowden launched a rushed campaign for the 7th District's Congressional seat as a Whig. He wrote to voters "I desire to see the Union preserved, the rights of the States maintained, the welfare of the people advanced, and the honor of the country upheld. The Constitution, as it was made by our fathers, I think the most glorious work of political wisdom which was ever framed by man; and that Constitution, unchanged and unperverted, I shall stand by, cherish, and support, against all assaults, from all quarters." (Alex. April 11, 1853)

The 7th District was heavy with Democrats and Snowden lost to William Smith.

### Young Edgar, Jr.

This was the decade that Edgar Jr. joined the team, rising to guide the *Gazette*, while his father made a second run for Congress. There was an early correspondence, from the time before he sat in the editor's chair, that sheds some light on the familial ties between the Snowden's, Custis' and Lees' and their involvement in slavery. Below is a letter from Uncle Custis to "Ned" [Edgar Jr.], who was 16 at the time. He asked the youth to follow up on a "letter from Bruin" and look at an enslaved family being held in Bruin's Jail on Custis behalf. [He wrote:](#)

"The Master of the servants wishes him (Bruin) to get them a home in Virginia. I want you to go and see them & write to me what they are worth, what kind of looking darkey's they are, their ages etc., whether they are hand Servants or field. He wrote me he asked \$1350 for the family - mother & five children. Say if they are sound & what sold for, whether the oldest child is a boy or girl & whether large enough to be of any service & how many girls & how many boys. I want to hear by Wednesday's mail."

### Back on the Campaign Trail

In 1856, Edgar Sr. announced his candidacy for the 7th District at the American Party Convention in Philadelphia, this time as a Know Nothing candidate. At the Pennsylvania meeting, the pro-slavery platform pushed by the southern delegates (Snowden among them) snapped the party in two.

This time, Edgar ran a traditional campaign on a regular timeline and in April 1857 gave up "entire control of the paper" to Edgar Jr., 22. [28]

Although he carried Alexandria City, Snowden lost again to William Smith. After the election, the anti-slavery Know Nothings were taken in by the Republicans and those who were pro-slavery joined the Democratic Party - slavery had broken them. [29]

Snowden's writing grew more and more polarizing over the decade. He continually attacked those who live in the north, calling them "maniacs" who were "foreign to our blood and manners." [30]

It has been written that the "*Gazette* was a political mentor and cultural arbiter, and shortly before the Civil War it claimed to have more subscribers than any Virginia newspaper published outside of Richmond." [31]

Is it any wonder then that Alexandrians voted 983 to 106 to ratify the Ordinance of Secession on May 23, 1861? Since Edgar Snowden always had a quote handy from the Greek philosopher Epicurus, he probably wouldn't mind this attempt at a remonstrance from Voltaire, "With great power comes great responsibility."

### Part 2 - To Be Continued in the January 2024 ACRP Newsletter

#### Notes:

1. "The Complexities of Slavery in the Nation's Capital," Lina Mann, The White House Historical Association.
2. "[About This Newspaper, Alexandria Gazette](#)" *The Alexandria Gazette*, 1822-1834, Chronicling America, Library of Congress.
3. *An Index of Virginia's Print Trade*, Researched and Edited by David A. Rawson, for his PhD dissertation at the College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA.
4. "Quaker Merchants and Slavery in Early National Alexandria, Virginia: The Ordeal of William Hartshorne," by A. Glenn Crothers, *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 47-77.
5. Ibid; and *Alexandria Gazette*, Aug. 12, 1813.

6. Ibid.
7. *1820 and 1830 Census for Alexandria and Fairfax, Virginia* accessed through Ancestry.com on multiple dates in December, 2024. Longdon traded slaves with Benjamin T. Dulany of Fairfax Co., Va, according to manumission records, Office of Historical Alexandria.
8. "Quaker Merchants and Slavery in Early National Alexandria, Virginia: The Ordeal of William Hartshorne," by A. Glenn Crothers, *Journal of the Early Republic*, Spring 2005, p. 74.
9. *Alexandria And The War of 1812, A Series of Articles Telling How Alexandrians Were Affected 200 Years Ago by the War of 1812*, By Ted Pulliam, Alexandria Archaeology Publications, #127, Office of Historic Alexandria, 2014.
10. *In the Shadow of Freedom: The Politics of Slavery in the National Capital*, Edited by Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon, 2010, US Capitol Historical Society, Ohio University Press.
11. John Longden's Last Will and Testament, Virginia, Wills and Probate Records, 1652-1900, Will Books, Vol. 1-3, 1810-1831, accessed via Ancestry.com in December, 2023.
12. "The Merchants of Pre-Civil War Alexandria: A Dynamic Elite in a Progressive City," Harold W. Hurst, *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Washington, D.C. Vol. 52, 1989, pp. 327-343, p.341. Louisa Grymes Snowden was a cousin of Mary Ann Randolph Custis who married Robert E. Lee, their children grew up in Alexandria at the same time. Both families attended Christ Church.
13. *Edgar Snowden Sr. Virginia Journalist and Civic Leader*, By Carrol H. Quenzel, Mary Washington College, Biographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1954, p.9.
14. "A Watermelon for God," by Fern C. Stukenbroeker. *A History of Trinity United Methodist Church Alexandria, Va. 1774-1974*, special collections at Alexandria Library, Barrett Branch.
15. *U.S. Census for Alexandria, Virginia, 1840 and 1850, Ward 1*, Ancestry.com; retrieved in December 2023.
16. *In the Shadow of Freedom*, Finkelman and Kennon, pp. 60 and 142.
17. *Snowstorm in August*, p. 117.
18. *Alexandria Gazette*, April 4,11,17 and 18, 1840.
19. The Snowden's may have left Nancy Longden's Trinity, when Edgar married Louisa, or they left when Trinity Pastor Alfred Griffith authored an antislavery resolution in 1844, that led to the creation of Washington Street Methodist as a pro-slavery alternative.
20. *Alexandria Gazette*, March 7, 1840, p.3; June 15, 1840, p.2; March 17, 1845.
21. "Respect for Adam's age, service, and talents will not prevent us," Snowden wrote, "from speaking of his malignant and incendiary conduct." Four days later, he spewed, "the nation is cursed with John Quincy Adams and his abolition petitions!" & The story about the House bill that Adams switched to allow Black Alexandrians to vote for mayor, from *In the Shadow of Freedom*, Finkelman and Kennon, pp. 158-159.
22. Ibid, p.157. To read the resolution on Retrocession approved by the Common Council, see *Alexandria Gazette*, July 11, 1840, p.2.
23. *Edgar Snowden Sr.*, Quenzel, p.17.
24. *Alexandria Gazette*, Sept. 16, 1846, attributed to *Lynchburg Newspaper*.
25. *In the Shadow*, Finkelman and Kennon, pp. 142-143, 155.

26. *Alexandria Gazette*, Apr. 19, 1848, p.3
27. *Alexandria Gazette*, Aug. 24, 1850, “Abolitionists”, p.2.
28. *Evening Star*, Feb. 20, 1856, p. 2.
29. *Britannica*, online version, [Britannica.com/topic/know-nothing-party](https://www.britannica.com/topic/know-nothing-party)
30. *Alexandria Gazette*, Sept. 2, 1853.
31. *Edgar Snowden Sr.*, Quenzel, p.39.

**By Tiffany D. Pache, Alexandria Community Remembrance Project Coordinator, December, 2023.**

[Joseph McCoy](#) [Benjamin Thomas](#).

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*The Alexandria Community Remembrance Project (ACRP) is a city-wide initiative dedicated to helping Alexandria understand its history of racial terror hate crimes and to work toward creating a welcoming community bound by equity and inclusion.*

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