Introduction

Mid-nineteenth-century America was a literate land, unburdened by the technological distractions that pervade twenty-first-century life. Men and women wrote to one another often, about their families, affairs of the heart, political and business matters, sickness, and social events. Politics engaged them. Men petitioned their elected officials and wrote to their many newspapers; the affluent expressed their views in public letters and privately published pamphlets. Adults and children kept diaries and journals.

In 1848, Americans were relishing victory in the Mexican War and war booty that included territories annexed from Mexico. These vast new lands stoked fresh debates over slavery, and they raged through Congress, state capitals, and parlors alike. Which would be free and which slave? This uneasy equilibrium came under increasing pressure from the unyielding abolitionists and Southern fire-eating nationalists who occupied the extremes. The latter vehemently opposed any federal interference with slavery—a prerogative historically reserved for the states, they claimed. The 1850s, however, sprouted an amalgam of Northern abolitionists, free-soilers, and former Whigs and Know-Nothings who organized a new Republican Party that by 1860 was pledging to thwart the expansion of human bondage.

When the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 led to the secession of South Carolina, war between North and South became increasingly likely. The cries of the righteous doomed efforts at compromise. The storm broke over Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in April 1861, and Americans found themselves caught in a conflict over slavery, the "peculiar institution," which, like a persistent mist, had soddened so much of our history.

Maryland, with proclivities North and South, found itself trapped—culturally, economically, and geographically. Lincoln's stance on slavery was clear and firm: He had pledged to prevent its taking root in new lands but not to interfere with it where it existed. Other states of the Deep South prepared to secede in early 1861. The adamant Republican position and militant Southern rhetoric alarmed many in the Upper South. Unnerved especially were citizens in Maryland's southern and Eastern Shore counties, which for more than two hundred years had prospered from the cultivation of tobacco and other crops—all made possible by the labor of slaves. Proslavery Democratic legislators from these agrarian areas remained a potent political force, and they had long worked diligently both to insulate slavery from government meddling and to keep even Maryland's free black citizens in positions of near servitude. It was small wonder, then, that Lincoln received only 2,249 Maryland votes (of 86,290 cast), finishing last of four candidates, and that, in seven Maryland counties, he received not one vote.

Maryland's economy in 1860 was a blend of Northern mercantilism and Southern agrarianism. Baltimore City reflected this dichotomy. The business climate in