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Historical Methods Term Paper

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Newspapers in Augusta and Franklin Counties:

Ever since the media has been around, it has always found its way into inserting the opinions of those running the news organization. In the case of the papers in Augusta and Franklin counties, biased opinions of slavery were often inserted into the articles of the respective county papers to influence the public attitudes of the secession crisis as well as other issues going on at this time. The media in this time may have inserted their own views on slavery, but were these necessarily the views of the citizens living there?

Though Franklin and Augusta counties were only about 200 miles away from each other, the real thing that separated them was not in distance, but in slavery. Franklin County, located in Pennsylvania, and Augusta County, located in Virginia each had their own views on slavery, which were published in the county papers. On the Valley of the Shadow website, the earliest accounts date back to March 1857 when the Staunton Spectator writes that though the abolition movements in the north are gaining momentum, there was really nothing to worry about.

(Unknown, Slavery in Virginia 1857) There are many more articles like this; all published in the Staunton Spectator from March 1857 through 1859. Up to this point, Franklin County's paper, the Franklin Repository, had published only one article directly talking about slavery. In this article published on January 1, 1859, the author gives a brief summary of Democratic Party's presidential candidate, Stephen Douglas. In fact, it is so short; it is a little difficult to make sense

of due to the lack of information provided. “William H. Seward declares the Democratic caucus's proscription of Stephen Douglas's presidential candidacy a sure sign of an ‘irrepressible conflict between Freedom and Slavery’ in the United States. The action illustrates ‘a settled determination to tolerate no diversity of opinion upon any measure which the South demanded.’” (Unknown, None 1859) Little information there is, it is clear what the author is trying to get across. They are saying that Douglas running for the presidential office is demonstrating the clear conflict between freedom and slavery. They are saying, point blank, that slavery is wrong and that they, and Douglas, will not back down to the South’s demands.

Just a few days later, the Staunton Spectator published a similar article, except that they had reversed views on slavery. Only a sentence long, the author calls for more young Democrats from Virginia enter the congressional race as the main issue involves the slavery question.

(Unknown, Richmonds in the Field 1859) Now it is clear that the views on abolition in the North are not going overlooked as they did a few years prior. Members of the Augusta County community want to keep slavery and they are determined to do so by keeping a pro-slavery majority in congress. Why were they doing so now? A string of articles that followed the two previous ones mentioned question on whether or not slavery should be legal in the territories. After reading some of these, it posed a question if those controlling the media controlled what views were portrayed in their publications.

In an article published in the Franklin Repository in April 1859, the author writes that Pennsylvania Governor William Packer would not “howl” for slavery. (Unknown, None 1859) After going back a few months, there is a reason why this would be published. In January, Gov. Packer gave his first annual message where he did not support the Free Trade Policy of the English Merchants and Manufacturers that was initiated by Southern leaders. In this policy, trade

was open between Pennsylvania and the South. This included the trade of slaves. “But Mr. Packer has seen proper to take the reverse of the above positions, and the consequence is that a large number of the so-called Democratic papers of the State are denouncing him for the independent utterance of his views, and the Spirit is a mum as the grave, which is equivalent to an open opposition.” (Unknown, Gov. Packer's Annual Message 1859) The summary before the article begins says that Packer did in fact support the tariff, but why did the Franklin Repository report him supposedly saying that he didn't?

In the previous article regarding Gov. Packer, it is clear that he did not support slavery, but that did not help him. Three months went by before this matter was clarified, but it did nothing to help Gov. Packer. Perhaps those in charge of the Franklin Repository used the issue of slavery to get a governor who they did not approve of out of office. After supposedly failing to agree to this trade, his political career remained intact, but he did not remain in office for very long due to his failing health. (Unknown, None 1859) In another article that I will mention later on in my paper, similar events were happening in the South in the case of an article published in the Staunton Spectator.

It is not just in these two counties where this was taking place, the media had been either supporting or condemning slavery ever since the early slave trade. According to an article on The Abolition Project website, the author suggests that the views of the newspapers during this time often reflected the views of the wealthier classes. The lower classes were also often left out because they were unable to read. (Unknown, The Abolition Project 2009) As time progressed, illiteracy was still a problem and the ruling classes were still able to put their views into the media since it was often them funding it. As seen from some of the articles I included above, it is clear that the media at this time had a role in printing what they want printed, especially in the

case of the articles about Gov. Packer. Slavery was a form of capitalism, like it or not, and those who supported it, did not want to let that form of income go. (Unknown, theunjustmedia.com n.d.) I think that is why the Franklin Repository did what they did in the case of Gov. Packer. He was a Democratic governor and the media made it seem that he failed to do what was expected of him. According to the Pennsylvania State Portal, Packer got his start in politics through the newspaper industry. When he was elected into office, he made it clear that he thought that slavery was going to divide the Democratic Party through the North and the South. The Democrats saw the tariff as a security for Pennsylvania industries in case the South seceded. (Pennsylvania 2013) Given this information, it is still unclear why the Franklin Repository did what they did. My only explanation was that those who were in charge of the paper did not approve of Packer and/or his politics and decided to turn the public against him.

While the media in Franklin County twisted the public view of politics, the media in Augusta County did the same. In their case, however, they had more to do with slavery itself. The Staunton Spectator, for example, said that African Americans were better off being enslaved than they were being free in January 1860. The first portion of the article deals with another article previously published in another newspaper regarding the horrors of slavery. “The condition of both, says the Herald, is miserable and degraded in the extreme, and really demands far more sympathy from the humane and philanthrop- [illegible] -an the most exaggerated descriptions of the condition of the negro while in slavery. The wretched lot to which these poor fugitives are abandoned by the abolitionists, after they are stolen away from their comfort and the protection of their Southern homes, is the most pitiable to which their race is condemned, outside of the original savage state from which they have been rescued.” (Unknown, Northern Free Negroes and Southern Slaves 1860)

We know that some of the citizens in Augusta County were slave owners, but from the articles provided we now realize that there is more tension regarding the abolition movements. In this next section of the article, the author alludes to the fact that slaves are better off being enslaved rather than being free and living in the North. “The negroes alluded to, says the Herald, like millions in the Southern States, are not only plentifully provided for in every way, but they are saving money to use as they may find best in coming years--and withal they seem as happy as lords. They work well and cheerfully in the day, and at night, during the holidays they sing, dance and smoke, eat sweet potatoes, drink hard cider, sit around big kitchen fires, ‘laugh and grow fat,’ regardless of all the “tomfoolery” and nonsense about the ‘poor oppressed slaves.’” (Unknown, Northern Free Negroes and Southern Slaves 1860) Now that statement has a lot going on. From what we talked about in class and from our common knowledge of slavery in the South, we know that this portion of the article is not correct. Perhaps that paper published this in a hope to persuade people to do a double take on the issue of slavery and consider it to be okay, since it is “helping” others. Or maybe they are trying to fool themselves into thinking that slavery is actually okay. An example of this theory could be found in another article from the Staunton Spectator suggesting that abolition will only lead to the extinction of the African race. (Unknown, The Results of African Labor in the New World 1860) In this article, the author argues that slavery brought prosperity to the United States, while abolition will result in the extinction of the African race. Unfortunately, the bottom of the article seems to have been cut off, but as I mentioned earlier in my paper, slavery was a form of capital that had brought prosperity to the U.S. Maybe the slave trade was a profitable form of capital in the 1600s and 1700s, but was it really that profitable to have slaves in Augusta County in 1860? After briefly examining the vast amount of data from the 1860 slave owner’s census, I noticed that many

people either had no slaves or they had one or two. Only a few slave owners in Augusta County at this time had more than that. Those who did were the ones in the community who owned businesses and larger plantations. Abolition was not something many people were too keen on at this time. The Staunton Spectator probably wanted to keep the public appeal in their favor and make sure that they portrayed slavery in the best light possible.

The views of slavery were also spread throughout Franklin County as well. In the case of the media in Franklin County, one of the first articles I read was not so much about slavery, but about anti-Southern sentiment being observed and that it will only get worse if things are not solved. (Unknown, A Few Facts for the Merchants and Manufacturers of the North 1860) A portion of the article reads, “Predicts that the economic consequences of anti-Southern sentiment in the North are already being observed, and that things will get worse if abolition sentiment continues to be acceptable in the North.” The author seems to be realizing that the abolition movement is now a force to be reckoned with, in complete contrast to the article published in March 1857.

The media has a very strong influence on what we will believe, but that does not go to say that we do not formulate our own opinions by our self, because we do. A column published in the Spectator suggested that Virginia be considered a border state and that the public decide for themselves on the slavery issue. This article, which is actually a letter to the editor praising a letter written by Dr. Rev. Breckenridge, suggests that if Virginia were to secede from the Union, then it would only lead to more troubles for them later on. “In like manner the border free States ought to remember that their borders are as much exposed as ours; so that on them, with reference to the free States behind them, rest the duty and the right of deciding the national

aspect of the subject of slavery on the free side of the line. It may be confidently asserted that posterity will hold these border States, on both sides, responsible for the fate of the nation, if they permit the country to be ruined, and themselves to be thrown into a position of endless mutual hostility, along a common frontier of fifteen hundred miles.” (Unknown, Letter of Dr. Breckenridge 1860) The article in which the letter to the editor is referring is about Dr. Rev. Breckenridge saying that Virginia should secede if it must, but the Border States should side with the Union. (Unknown, Letter of Dr. Breckenridge 1860) The article itself is very long, but the context of it is so significant. Here is a man from Virginia saying that if Virginia wants to secede from the Union, then it should do it, but the remainder of the border states should side with the Union.

"Civil war itself within the Union, horrible as civil war always is, is necessarily temporary, and is consistent with the ultimate preservation of everything distinctive in our present nationality, and in all our institutions, general and particular; and a universal civil war at this time within the Union could hardly fail to end in the permanent establishment, for the whole country, of just what our fathers established from 1776 to 1789. But after the division of the Union upon the slave line, and the necessary breaking out of fierce and interminable war along the frontier extending from the Atlantic Ocean to the western border of Missouri, no man can foresee a state of case when peace can ever be preserved along that frontier as well as it can be in the Union, and every man can see that any future union of the divided portions of the Confederacy, if any union shall ever be possible, must be upon the very terms which now exist. It is alleged, however, that there is the utmost probability that a Northern anti-slavery party will ultimately acquire controlling influence over every department of the Federal Government, and that the slave States cannot, consistently with honor, continue members of a Union controlled by

such a party. 'To this let me say,' continues Dr. B., "first of all, that if every word were true and certain, the wise, manly and successful alternative would be, not the dissolution of the Union, but the recovery of the country, by force if necessary, from those who shall have subverted its Constitution. Nor can there be any doubt that the united South and the minority of the North will be always and to every intent, without arms or with arms, more powerful in the Union than the united, much less the divided South, can ever be out of it. Nor does it appear to me to be loyal to the people of the North who are faithful to the Constitution, even if they were the smaller number, for the South to withdraw and leave them subject to a domination as intolerable to them as it is offensive to us."

We can hardly doubt that if the real feelings and wishes of the people, North and South, could be represented at Washington, uninfluenced by partizan [sic] bias, the whole matter in controversy would soon be settled without difficulty. How stands the case? The Republicans at the North generally disclaim any intention or desire to interfere with slavery as it exists in the Southern States, but profess to believe that it is the settled policy of the South, by means of the Federal government, to extend slavery throughout the country; and to resist this encroachment of the "slave power" as they call it, they are organized into a political party. On the other hand, the South generally believes that the Northern majority are banded together to wage a fanatical crusade against the institution. The long continued and virulent abuse of slavery and slaveholders by Republican speakers and writers certainly encourages the impression alluded to. Admitting, for the sake of argument, that slavery is a bad institution, it is difficult to tell why those who have no responsibility on account of it, and no control over it, should persist in denouncing it, unless they desire to raise a crusade for its extermination. But if the Republicans are sincere in their formal declarations, there need be little difficulty in coming to an amicable

settlement. With the exception of a few extreme men at the South, the people of this section are not "slavery propagandists"--they have no desire to carry slavery into any Territory now free, and it is not their interest to do so.--They could give profitable employment to many more slaves than they now hold, and the institution would only be weakened by being diffused. They, however, with reason, object to being told that they shall not do what they believe that they have a Constitutional right to do, although they have no idea of doing it. Why then cannot all parties and both sections agree to let the matter alone and cease agitation. Soil and climate will, without doubt, ultimately settle the boundaries of slave and free territory to the satisfaction of all reasonable people." (Unknown, Letter of Dr. Breckenridge 1860)

Before I read this article, I thought that Dr. Rev. Breckenridge would be siding with Virginia 100 percent. This article is a great example of how the media should have been portraying the views of the citizens on the issue of slavery as well as showing that there were people in the South, (in this case Augusta County,) who did not always agree with the rest of the population. Nobody wanted to go to war, as Dr. Rev. Breckenridge suggested. By this time, or a little while after, the damage was done. The war had begun and the media now had a new role to fill. The newspapers, not just in Augusta and Franklin counties but across the nation, used wartime propaganda to get their views across.

As we know today, the media still manages to insert their own views into their news segments and publications. These biased attitudes must be changed if we are to portray the events that happen around us accurately. After reading through the various articles, it is evident that the media in the 1850s and 1860s could have reported things accurately as well. Perhaps if they did, enough views could have been changed.

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