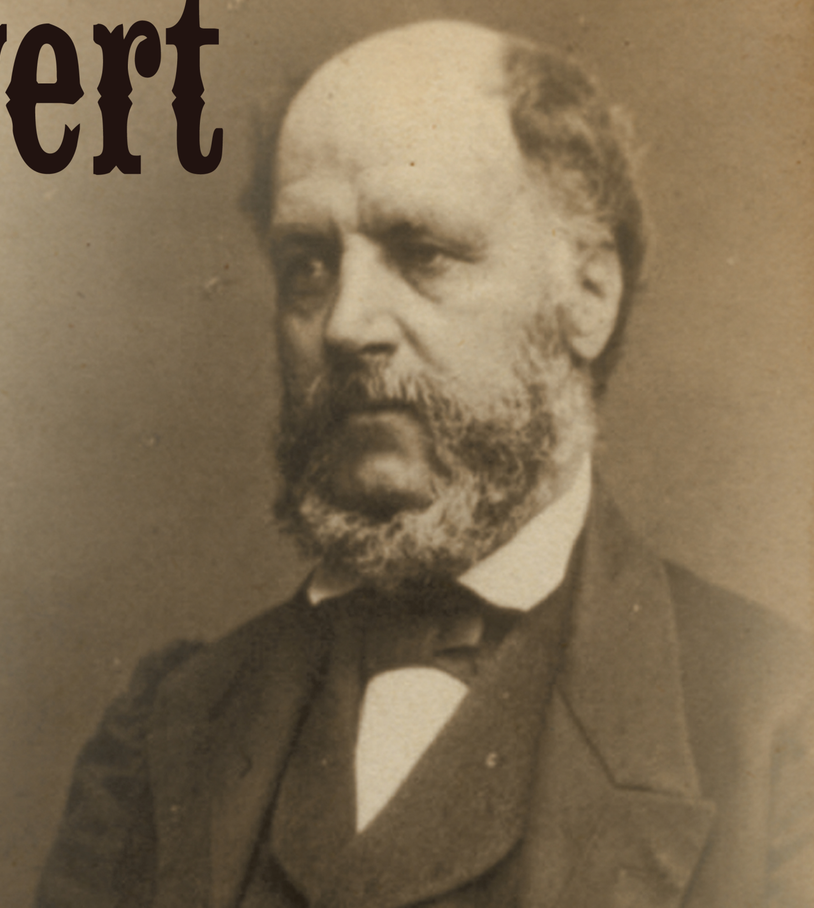
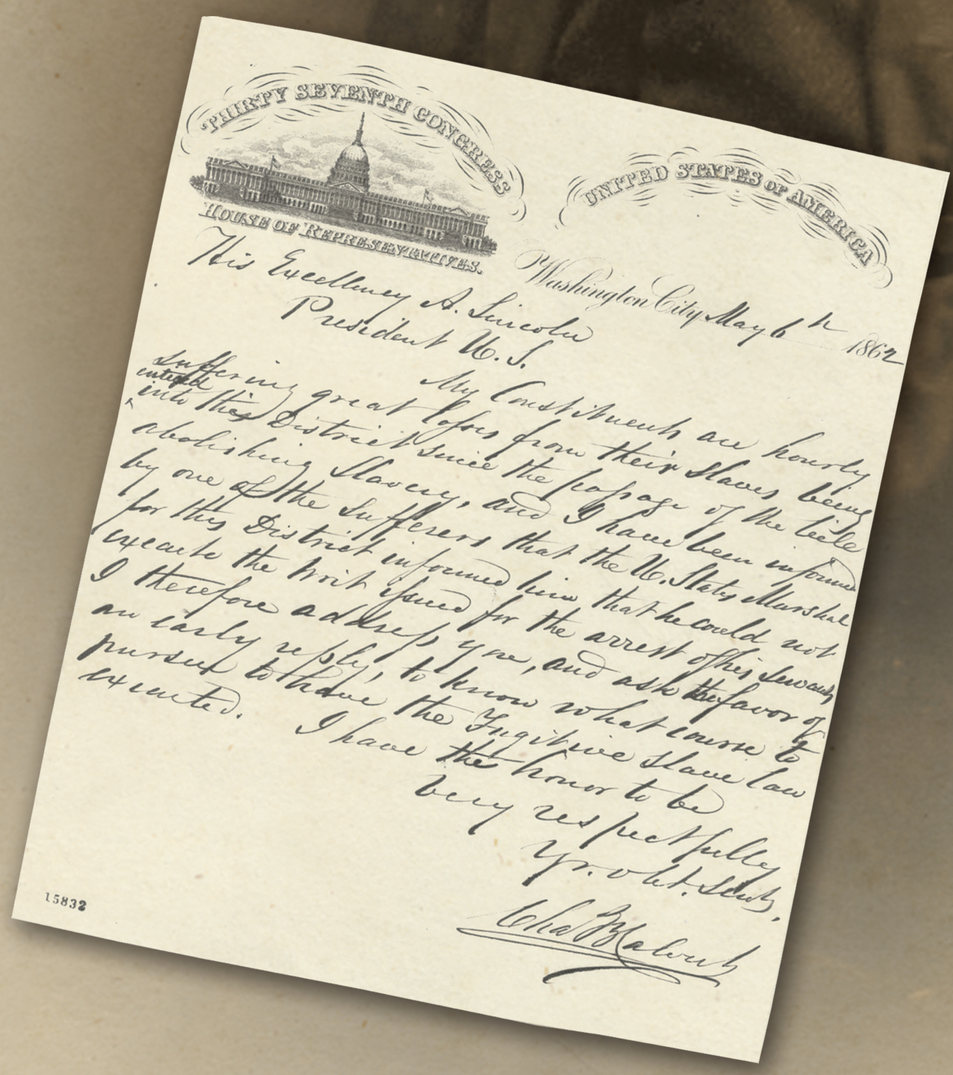
Charles Benedict Calvert



At once a staunch unionist, a beneficiary of the planter's way of life, and a prominent citizen of a state more divided than any other, the life of Charles Benedict Calvert, founder of the Maryland Agricultural College, was a microcosm of the Civil War conflict.

For over 25 years, Calvert strongly advocated for the establishment of agricultural education in Maryland and actively sought to make his vision a reality. He served as president of the Board of Trustees of MAC, and even as college president when an unexpected vacancy arose. He also ensured the college's viability on many fronts, holding the second largest number of subscriptions to its stock and providing a portion of his Riversdale plantation for the original campus. His four sons were the first names entered in the Student Register when classes began in October 1859.





Charles Benedict Calvert was the state's agricultural leader, yet he did not throw in his lot with the openly Confederate sympathizers among his colleagues and neighbors. Elected to the United States Congress from strongly southern Prince George's County in 1860 by a very narrow margin, Calvert walked a fine line between his role as a planter and slaveholder and efforts to preserve the Union.

He was vilified by the local press for approving military appropriations for waging war on neighboring states and appearing docile in the face of what many saw as the oppression of the Lincoln administration. At the same time, he actively sought to protect private property rights of border state slaveholders, meeting with and writing to President Lincoln on several occasions to protest the harboring of slaves in military camps and the failure to enforce the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. In 1861, he pointedly reminded the president of "untiring efforts of the Union men against great difficulties" and warned that current offenses jeopardized the Union cause.

The following year, he publicly opposed emancipation, but in 1863, signaled some movement in his position. During his unsuccessful attempt to return to Congress, he wrote that he was "not so seeded to the institution that I would sacrifice the public will or welfare of my State on the shrine of private or pecuniary interest." Although he was a slaveholder himself, he was able to focus on the greater good of the Union.

Calvert died suddenly on May 12, 1864, before the war ended, and before a new Maryland Constitution freed the state's enslaved population later that year on November 1. His leadership at MAC and in Maryland was greatly missed during the post-war years.

Calvert Photograph, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, reproduction number: LC-DIG-cwpbh-03464; MAC stock certificate, Maryland Manuscript #4980, University of Maryland Libraries; Charles B. Calvert to Abraham Lincoln, May 6, 1862, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.