

A College Divided:

Maryland Agricultural College and the Civil War



The Maryland Agricultural College had scarcely opened its doors when the Civil War began, and the far-reaching events of those four years of conflict affected its organizational history and the personal lives of many individuals associated with it.

The Maryland Agricultural College (MAC) was founded by Charles Benedict Calvert and other prominent Maryland farmers to educate their sons in the latest practical and scientific agricultural methods. When MAC opened to students on October 5, 1859, with a public celebration, tensions over the issue of slavery and its extension into western territory were already high.

It was only 11 days later that abolitionist John Brown led a raid on the federal arsenal in Harper's Ferry, with the goal of arming Virginia slaves and provoking an uprising. Sectional conflict after the trial and execution of Brown grew even more intense. Then, in November of MAC's second academic year, Abraham Lincoln was elected president, and hopes of avoiding war by compromise faded even further. South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860, and, in the following months, 10 other southern states followed her lead.

Maryland was literally caught in the middle between the agricultural world of the South and the industrial and business world of the North, sharing strong ties with both. It was a slave-holding state, yet almost half of its black population was free. For a short time, it appeared that Maryland would follow its southern neighbors in secession, but given its strategic importance to the Union, Lincoln took strong measures to squelch dissent within the state and seize civil control.

Although the college remained open for the four years of the war, it was anything but business-as-usual. Given its proximity to Washington, D.C., and the railroad, it would have been impossible to insulate the college's population from the news. Departures of students from its relatively small enrollment to enlist would not go unnoticed. In July 1862, the college conferred its first two degrees, and the *Baltimore Sun* reported that "The institution, like everything else, has felt the bad effect of the war, losing some Southern students thereby...."

Rumors circulated that the college would be taken over and turned into a government hospital, housing up to 500 patients. Union troops camped on the grounds overnight in April 1864, and in July of the same year, Confederate troops paid a visit that had lingering effects on the college's reputation, as varying stories of a Rebel welcome spread.

Following the war, the college closed for one year in 1866 because of financial difficulties, but when additional federal, land-grant funds and state funds were appropriated, MAC re-opened in a new era of more democratic and public education. The transition was not necessarily smooth or rapid, as the broad political power struggle at work during the war moved to the state and local level.

Over three million men served in the military during the Civil War, with over 600,000 deaths and nearly one million casualties, leaving a large proportion of the population in mourning. The war was fought on American soil, affecting countless farms, livestock, businesses, and other personal property. Many families were completely displaced or financially ruined or both. Reconstruction, complicated by sectional emotions, impacted American life severely for decades. And, for some, the Civil War will never be over.

It is often said that numbers alone do not tell the real story, and that is particularly true when those numbers are nearly beyond comprehension. This exhibit examines the lives of just a few of the many individuals associated with MAC – students, faculty, administrators, stockholders, and trustees – illuminating the Civil War through a very specific prism. In this way, it seeks to deepen understanding of the war's toll in individual terms.



Liberty and Union.

