

THE BROTHERS' WAR: SECTIONAL TENSIONS IN A CIVIL WAR FAMILY

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With their connections to both north and south the Border States – Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland and Delaware - have long proved attractive to historians, particularly the unsettled condition of Maryland in April 1861. After the Pratt Street riots of April 19th when the 6th Massachusetts regiment was attacked by a pro-southern mob, a siege mentality enveloped the city. Whether these riots were a spontaneous uprising or whether they were evidence of deep southern sympathies, it is apparent that the atmosphere in Baltimore at that time was one of defiance and anger, with even the most level-headed citizen swept up in the excitement.

One such man was Jabez Pratt, a Baltimore lawyer and commissioner of deeds. Born in Boston in 1815, Jabez moved to Baltimore in the 1840's, opening his own law agency in 1847. By 1860 his practice was well-established and he had a personal wealth of \$25,000. Married to Lucy, he had 4 boys. Joseph, who at 19 was the oldest, had been born in Massachusetts, but the other boys had all been born in Baltimore.

By contrast, John - his younger brother - still resided in Boston. 3 years his junior he had achieved success as a Real Estate Broker, with a personal wealth of \$10,000 in the 1860 census. Married to Mary, John also had 4 sons aged between 13 years and 4 months.

Despite the distance between the siblings there is nothing to suggest that their pre-war relationship was in anyway strained. Indeed, the first letter between the two that survives was written in response to John offering his brother sanctuary from the

turmoil in Baltimore. Jabez's reply, obviously written in the heat of the moment, perfectly illustrates the Baltimore mood at this time.

My dear brother:

I have received your dispatch, and while I thank you for your kindness in the offer, we, both Lucy and myself, are not disposed to run, - much less into the arms of infernal abolitionism.

Let any more Northern troops attempt passage of this city and not one will live to tell the story...We are not to be subjugated by Lincoln and his hordes....

I have just got arms and Joseph and myself intend to do what we can, be it ever so little. If he would not fight I would disown him.

(Maryland Historical Society, Civil War collection, J.D. Pratt to J.C. Pratt, April 20th 1861)

This is an extraordinary letter; by stating that he and Lucy are 'not disposed to run – much less into the arms of infernal abolitionism' Jabez is stating that all Bostonians, and by inference his brother and family, are abolitionists and therefore his enemy.

Furthermore, his provocative tone and talk of dying for the cause is only increased when he states that he would disown Joseph if he refused to fight. Since the 'invading troops' caught up in the Pratt Street Riots were the 6th Massachusetts it is apparent that after a decade of living in Baltimore, Jabez feels little connection to his home state.

This siege mentality was shared by many Baltimore residents. On April 19th James Dorsey wrote to Lewis Richardson that while he wished to send his wife and children away, they would not consent to leave. He told his friend: "I think it very likely that every man will be called on to defend his home and friends which I am very willing to do." (Maryland Historical Society, *Richardson Papers*, 'James L. Dorsey to Lewis Richardson, April 19 1861)

The fact that Jabez was merely echoing the views of many Baltimore residents was little comfort for John and his reply of the 24th is quite understandably, one of hurt and anger.

My dear brother:

I have just received your letter, and I need hardly say that I am pained at its contents. The manner in which you treat my invitation that you would send your wife and little ones to my care where they would be out of danger is cruel and unkind. The time will come, aye it will sooner that (sic.) you believe, when you will be proud to proclaim yourself a 'son of Massachusetts.'

If Baltimore is a 'yawning gulf' to bury Northern troops in, the same gulf will bury the last vestige of your beautiful city... before this contest ends a full, safe and unobstructed passage will be opened for our troops to the Capitol.

(MHS, Civil War collection, J.C.P. to J.D.P', April 24th, 1861)

This letter shows a conscious effort on John's part to remind Jabez of where he believes his loyalties should lie – with his home city and State. Of particular interest is that both brothers view the conflict very much in terms of black and white, but on opposite sides of the question. While Jabez views it as merely the result of northern aggression, John sees it as the north protecting themselves from the actions of southern fanatics.

Perhaps seeing his previous letter in the cold light of day, Jabez replied to John on the 27th thanking him for his offer, and explaining how his previous letter was written in a state of excitement caused by the deliberate murder of Robert W. Davis, a Baltimore merchant.

I thank you and know that you could harbour no other feelings towards me... under similar circumstances I would have done the same for you...

He [Davis] was standing quietly laughing and talking with two of his and my friends, totally ignorant of any riots or difficulties in the city... when a soldier from the platform of the car in very slow motion deliberately aimed and shot him down...

This incident would seem to explain Jabez's heated state of mind – the *Baltimore Sun* of April 20th stated that the killing "has created an immense feeling in this community, especially among the merchants, of which class he was an honoured member."

(*Baltimore Sun*, April 20th 1861) Jabez's belief that the killing was the mindless act of a northern soldier is harder to substantiate. The Mayor of Baltimore, George W. Brown, wrote a memoir some years afterwards, describing in detail the Baltimore riots. In this he stated that Davis along with two friends raised a 'hurrah' for Jeff Davis as the train passed, and it was this that caused the soldier to fire. (Brown 1982: 52)

You must permit me to add that while in your house as a guest last summer when the proprieties of hospitality should have restrained your family even if I had not requested it, I was compelled to listen to sermons on 'John Brown raids' which I never can forget, and that is what I called infernal abolitionism.

For myself I can hold no other than brotherly affection though we may differ and be separated.

As for being proud of Massachusetts, I long ago lost all such feelings, and if my relations could be moved from the scene I would like nothing better than to see Massachusetts and South Carolina swallow each other up."

(MHS, Civil War collection, J.D. Pratt to J.C. Pratt, April 27th 1861)

These comments on 'John Brown raids' showcase how Jabez had become fully immersed in Baltimore society by this point. While his hometown of Boston was home to pockets of antislavery sentiment, most notably William Lloyd Garrison's publication, *The Liberator*, the Border States had a growing fear of slave rebellion and abolitionists due to their large free black population and their proximity to Free states. As the *Montgomery Mail* observed in 1860: "The institution [slavery] is even now in a tottering condition in the border slaveholding states, where the people are constantly expecting fresh John Brown raids." ¹ (Crenshaw, 1945: 196)

This common fear helps explain why residents such as Jabez who owned no slaves, still felt a vested interest in the continuation of slavery. Over the last few decades Maryland's free black population had expanded and by the Civil War amounted for almost 49% of the State's black total. Concerns over the roles of these

¹ *Montgomery Daily Mail*, May 17, 1860.

free blacks in society had led the State to look at solutions to the problem - most famously the continued attempts to colonise emancipated slaves and consenting freemen in Africa. By 1860, with the fear and hysteria generated by John Brown, slavery in Maryland was maintained more as a form of racial control than as an economic system. (Berlin, 1992: 202-203)

Residents of Baltimore were especially sensitive to concerns over free blacks, competition for jobs and racial tensions proving a volatile mix. In one such instance whites sought to regain control of the caulking trade, which free blacks had come to dominate. Beginning in 1858 gangs of whites roamed the Baltimore docks, beating caulkers and harassing the shipyards that employed them; by 1860 the free black monopoly was broken, with many having to seek work elsewhere.² (Berlin: 349) With over 25,000 free blacks resident in Baltimore in 1860 - over 12% of the total population – talk of ‘race-war’ was taken all too seriously.

With the letter Jabez also enclosed a clipping from the *Baltimore Sun* detailing his role in the famous meeting of Baltimore men that visited Lincoln on April 22nd to try and persuade him to send troops around Baltimore. The men came away satisfied that Lincoln would respect their wishes; as he stated: “now sir, if you won’t hit me, I won’t hit you.” (*Baltimore Sun*, April 23rd 1861) Although Jabez was proud of his part in this, the response from John was not what he had hoped for. ³ (Dennet, 1939: 6)

² *Baltimore American*, 5, 8 July 1858, 28 June 1859, 8 February 1860; *Baltimore Sun*, 3, 5 June 1858, 13 July 1858, 28 June 1859

³ John Hay, the private secretary of President Lincoln, was also distinctly underwhelmed by the actions of the delegation. He recorded in his diary his account of the meeting: “This morning came a penitent and suppliant crowd of conditional Secessionists from Baltimore, who having sown the seed seem to have no particular desire to reap the whirlwind. They begged that no more Federal troops should be sent through Baltimore at present; that their mob was thoroughly unmanageable and that they would give the Government all possible assistance in transporting its troops safely across the State by any other route. The President, always inclined to give all men credit for fairness and sincerity, consented to this arrangement contrary to the advice of some of his most prominent counsellors. And afterwards said, that this was the last time he was going to intervene in matters of strictly military concernment. That he would leave them hereafter wholly to military men.”

I wonder he had not called his cabinet together to consult upon the proposition, seize upon it before it 'grew cold'. I wonder that instead of smiling with ill concealed contempt he had not grasped your hands and said, - 'Gentlemen, you have saved the country', and you should each of you have a monument of brass erected to your memory...

Pardon me, my dear brother, if I treat this matter with levity, but I am surprised that you should be a party to this consummate folly.

...Let this war continue a few months, and the whirlwind now gathering will sweep within its vortex the South and slavery, and all will perish together. I hope not, but as I have before told you, there is danger.

(MHS, *Civil War collection*, 'J.C. Pratt to J.D. Pratt, April 27th, 1861)

It is sometimes hard to remember that John is actually the younger brother, his distance from the prospect of war allowing him to use a condescending, considered manner. By contrast the emotional outbursts of Jabez serve to make him look younger than he actually is. John's frank comments about the death of slavery, especially after having read his brother's comments about 'John Brown' speeches, suggest that he is not even trying to moderate his views.

By contrast, Jabez was still trying to atone for the harsh nature of his first letter. On April 29th, before he had received John's reply, he composed another message, reasserting his desire for good relations between them.

My dear brother,
...The excitement of our citizens caused by the shooting of our friends has entirely abated. The mob of Friday is deprecated now that reason has its sway.

Maryland is not going to be hasty and the feeling which before the trouble was prevalent is again shown, that of a peaceable solution of the dispute between North and South...

Accept my kind regards and best wishes for yourself and be assured that I hold nothing in my heart of bitterness towards you.

(MHS, *Civil War collection*, 'J.D. Pratt to J.C. Pratt, April 29th 1861)

The last sentence highlights a growing trend throughout all of Jabez's letters to this point; that whatever feelings he may hold about the actions of the North or even those of his own family, the bond of blood overrides such petty differences. Unfortunately his

brother was not quite as tactful and his letter regarding Jabez's meeting with Lincoln, whether meant in jest or not, was interpreted as a terrible slur. In a letter dated May 1st Jabez replied:

My brother: You are fast driving me to consider that term inappropriate.

I have received your letter of the 27th, and if you consider me a 'fool and a boor' why so be it.

The only answer I have... is that you are crazy. I will only say further that you entirely misinterpret and misunderstand the mission to Washington and what was asked of Mr Lincoln. We asked nothing of what you so glibly ridicule.

If such is to be your correspondence it had better be stopped till you get your senses.

(MHS, Civil War collection, 'J.D. Pratt to J.C. Pratt, May 1st 1861)

But worse was to come and once again, Jabez was the offended party. He found out that his initial letter to John, in which he had turned down his offer of accommodation, had been reprinted in the *Boston Evening Journal*. This airing of what he believed to be private business between brothers was the final blow to his wounded pride. In an angry letter on May 3rd he wrote:

May God forgive you for this act of dishonour and private treason I had the use of the columns of our paper here but I would suffer death before I would violate the confidence of a brother's correspondence...

Christian men and women in Boston, and from your letters I suppose you with the rest, instead of praying for peace, pray for blood, flames, murder, and the violation of women and children.

...I will say that I forgive you and will pray for you, but I fear you have broken the chain which should unite brothers forever and that we must part. This is a bitter cup. It cuts me to the quick and I can hardly see through my tears which flow as I write these lines.

May God forgive you.

(MHS, Civil War collection, J.D. Pratt to J.C. Pratt, May 3rd 1861)

Again, although Jabez is angry with his brother, he still extends the hand of brotherhood by initiating that he will forgive John for publishing the letter. In his reply,

John tries to justify his actions, and when the situation in Boston is considered his actions do seem understandable. The April 23rd edition of the paper stated that “we are still without direct communication with any point farther south than Philadelphia, and the anxiety to obtain information as to the movements at Washington is becoming intense.” (*Boston Evening Journal*, April 23rd 1861) With rumours of southern troop movements and offences growing widespread it is not hard to see why the paper was keen to publish dispatches from Baltimore.

On May 6th John replied: “My Dear Brother: Your letter exhibits so much feeling that I begin to feel as if I had done some terrible thing.... I had no design to injure you and I had no thought till this moment that I had done so.”

John goes on to state how a reporter friend asked him for any Baltimore news contained in Jabez’s letter. John had assented on the conditions that the names be suppressed.

If I hurt your feelings... it was an error of judgement and not of the heart, and as to your publishing my letters, you are welcome to print every line I have written you in every paper in Baltimore.

You say a great many harsh things in the letter which I will not reply to. For I have no doubt you were under as great a state of excitement when you wrote this letter as when you wrote your first, and you will regret what you say in the last as you have in the first case

...

Now, Jabez, there is no use in getting mad or in keeping mad. Act like a sensible man and don’t make such a great fuss over such a small matter. I expect you and I will make our names immortal before this contest ends, and it won’t do to stop at such trifles as this.

(MHS, Civil War collection, ‘J.C. Pratt to J.D. Pratt, May 6th 1861)

It is interesting to note that while John states that the names were suppressed, only the names of Jabez and Lucy were removed; the reference to John bearing arms was retained, obviously to show the excited nature of Baltimoreans. The paper also published John's reply of April 24th with its reference to Jabez being a 'son of Boston', making it quite apparent to many people who the letters referred to. Perhaps realising this, John for the first time makes an open reference to standing side by side with his brother, defending 'against all vengeance' the honour of the Pratts. From the tone of Jabez's previous letter though, it is debatable whether the apology would have been accepted.

These two men, despite their common upbringing in Boston, had vastly different ideas about how the war should be fought, the distance between them as great in attitude as it was in miles. It has often been said that a 'mild hysteria' enveloped Baltimore after the Pratt Street riots, one that soon dissipated, leaving behind a populace confused and almost embarrassed by their actions. Such was the case with Jabez, who while he still disagreed with the policies of the administration, quickly drew back from the warlike stance that he first advocated. As one resident wrote on May 4th: "Since my last letter to you times have considerably quieted and now; if it were not for the newspaper reports, and the seeing of a good many soldiers on the streets you would imagine anything else but war... every person keeps quiet." (Maryland Historical Society, Shriver Family Papers, 'C.C. Shriver to Frederick A. Shriver', Baltimore, May 4th 1861)

Perhaps the greatest tragedy about this correspondence is that in such a situation it would be almost impossible for the brothers to comprehend the viewpoint of the other. One came from a slaveholding state that if there were a war, would more than likely become one of the main battlegrounds. This siege mentality, as well as Maryland misgivings over free blacks and his by-then established position in Baltimore

society, helped redefine Jabez's mindset from Bostonian to Baltimorean. The other brother was from a state with an abolitionist tradition, one far removed from the realities of the battlefield and the frightening possibility that the war could be fought on their doorstep. Such different cultural expectations and designs would have strained even the closest relationship.

Unfortunately the fate of the warring siblings is unknown. In the 1870 census John and his family are still in Boston, but there is no trace of Jabez, Joseph, or any of the Baltimorean branch of the family. It is tempting to speculate that they were able to overcome the sectional divide and become close again but if the examples of so many other families have taught us anything, the rift, as with so many scars caused by the Civil War, would not be so easily healed.



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