

Montgomery Blair

A figure of national stature, member of an influential Montgomery County family, and an enslaver in Missouri who later espoused both antislavery and anti-Black sentiments

Montgomery Blair (1813–83), namesake of Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, has a complex, even contradictory, legacy. He argued for an enslaved man’s freedom in one of the most consequential U.S. Supreme Court cases, but strongly opposed equal rights for Blacks after the Civil War. He felt Blacks were a “separate caste...forever to remain a distinct people because of their ‘alien nature’” and identified himself as “an open opponent of both negro slavery and negro equality.” As late as 1879, he opposed voting rights for Blacks, despite passage nine years earlier of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution extending suffrage to Black men.

A Democrat in Missouri early in life, he later joined the short-lived Free Soil Party in opposition to slavery in the territories, then became an early supporter of the Republican Party. He served as Postmaster General in Abraham Lincoln’s “team of rivals” Cabinet, chosen as a border stater—being from Missouri but also Maryland, where Blair had moved by then. Blair was one of the Cabinet’s strongest proponents of military action against the Confederacy but also “the most conservative member...on racial issues,” according to one biography.

He had come to national prominence as the lawyer for Dred Scott, an enslaved man in Missouri suing for his freedom (on the basis of having been taken to a free state). The now-infamous 1857 Supreme Court decision against Scott denied all Blacks citizenship rights, inflaming divisions prior to the Civil War. The 1850 slave census, at right, lists one 25-year-old man next to Montgomery Blair’s name when he was living in Missouri. (His brother Francis is next with three.) Four are listed under “M Blair” in the 1840 census, also in Missouri.¹

	NAMES OF SLAVE OWNERS.	Number of Slaves.	DESCRIPTION.		
			Age.	Sex.	Colour.
	1	2	2	1	2
36	Montgomery Blair	1	25	M	W
37	Francis Blair	3	20	M	W
38		2	20	M	W
39		2	8	F	W

The contours of his views on slavery are hard to delineate precisely. He professed to be antislavery: “No one who knows my political career will suspect that I am influenced by an indisposition to put an end to slavery,” he said in 1861. “I have left no opportunity unimproved to strike at it...but I have never believed that the abolition of slavery...ought to be effected except by lawful and constitutional modes.” He supported compensated, gradual emancipation accompanied by colonization—repatriation of Blacks to Africa. He objected to Lincoln issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, fearing border states’ reaction. About the same time, he obtained the release of a Montgomery County enslaver from prison who was being held for trying to recover a freedom seeker.

Blair disagreed strongly with the more “radical” wing of the Republican party, which sought full citizenship for Blacks, denouncing them (in an 1863 Rockville speech) as “ultra abolitionists.” Historian Richard Nelson Current, called the dean of Lincoln scholars in the 20th century, concluded that Blair ultimately had “not a trace of the abolitionist spirit. True, he had won the respect of some abolitionists by serving as counsel for...Dred Scott, but he was no Negro-phile [sic]. His racist convictions were as strong as his Unionist convictions, and these were strong indeed.”

¹ Age ranges listed in the 1840 census—the only information available—correspond to that of Montgomery Blair, his first wife, and a young daughter at that time, but the exact identity of that “M Blair” remains uncertain.

To strengthen his support among his party's more liberal wing ahead of his reelection bid, Lincoln asked for Blair's resignation in 1864. As a member of a legendary contentious Cabinet, Blair had indeed clashed with other "rival" colleagues, though he was particularly known for "his violent personal antagonisms," in the words of Lincoln's aide John Hays, and for showing "little respect" and even "virulent hatred" toward others, according to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. (In a more positive vein, she noted that he "accomplished marvels as Postmaster General," "utterly transforming" and "modernizing" the Post Office.)

Despite his "firing," Blair worked for Lincoln's reelection but soon returned to the Democratic Party and supported successor Andrew Johnson's conciliatory approach to readmitting the southern states over the Radical Republicans' more stringent Reconstruction terms and protections for Blacks. As a Maryland Democrat, he was elected to the House of Delegates in 1878 but was defeated in a bid for Congress in 1882. When he died a year later, the entire U.S. Post Office closed for a day in his honor. The high school named for him opened more than a half-century later in 1935, the same year Richard Montgomery was officially adopted as the name of an older high school in Rockville.

A final point is warranted about the close-knit Blair family—which Lincoln himself called a "closed corporation." Father Francis Preston Blair Sr., a one-time Democratic newspaper editor and later a Lincoln confidant, owned what is now known as the Blair House across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House—along with four enslaved people there, according to the 1840 census. In 1845 he built a "country estate" called "Silver Spring" just beyond the northern tip of D.C. The 1850 census lists 20 enslaved people working there. The 1860 census a decade later, shown here, counts 15 (although six are listed as "fugitives from the state").

Shortly before the Civil War, son Montgomery built a home of his own nearby. (It was burned by Confederates advancing on Washington in 1864.) There is no indication Montgomery Blair enslaved anyone there, only earlier in Missouri. As early residents, the Blairs are considered the founders of Silver Spring, and were progenitors of the politically influential Montgomery County Blair-Lee family.

NAMES OF SLAVE OWNERS.	Number of Slaves.	DESCRIPTION.			
		Age.	Sex.	Color.	Fugitives from the State.
Francis P. Blair	1	60	m	B	
"	1	45	m	B	
"	1	40	f	B	
"	1	40	f	B	
"	1	45	f	B	
"	1	30	f	B	
"	1	20	m	B	
"	1	17	m	B	
"	1	14	m	B	
"	1	6	f	B	✓
"	1	4	m	B	✓
"	1	4	f	B	✓
F.P.B. son?	1	30	f	B	✓
"	1	2	f	B	✓
"	1	2	f	B	✓

Montgomery's brother, Francis Jr., who once practiced law with his brother in Missouri and held enslaved there (three in 1840 and 1850, one in 1860), was the Democratic Party's 1868 vice presidential candidate. His campaign, supported by his brother, was "center[ed] on white supremacy" and marked by "blatantly racist language," according to the foremost historian of that period, Eric Foner.

Main sources:

Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 2005

The Lehrman Institute, "Mr. Lincoln & Friends: The Cabinet," <http://www.mrlincolnandfriends.org/the-cabinet/montgomery-blair>; "Montgomery Blair," <http://www.mrlincolnandfreedom.org/library/mr-lincolns-contemporaries/montgomery-blair>