

## Telling Our Stories: Montgomery Blair and Grace Church

Many of us hear the name “Montgomery Blair” and first associate it with the Montgomery County public high school on University Boulevard. The school is named after Montgomery Blair, an attorney who represented Dred Scott in the seminal 1857 Supreme Court case, who served as an influential member of President Abraham Lincoln’s cabinet, and who lived in Silver Spring and served as a vestry member and lay minister of Grace Church in its early days.

**Blair embodied moral contradictions in both his professional and his personal life.** While he represented Dred Scott in his quest for freedom and strongly supported the Union during the Civil War, he maintained racist beliefs throughout his life.

Was Blair an enslaver? Census records show that, as a young man in Missouri, an enslaved man was part of his household.<sup>1</sup> Later, Blair received an enslaved woman as a wedding gift from his father-in-law.<sup>2</sup> Rather than free the woman, he transferred ownership to his father. Later census records show no enslaved people in his household in 1860, when he lived in Washington, DC, and Silver Spring.

After the Civil War, Blair argued that reparations should be paid—to *enslavers*, not the formerly enslaved people—and supported the concept of colonization: relocating Black Americans outside the United States as an alternative to welcoming them fully into society.

### Early Life and Dred Scott Case

Blair was born in 1813 in Kentucky into a politically connected family. His father, Francis Preston Blair, had been a confidante to President Andrew Jackson. The family was conservative: they were anti-abolitionist and did not believe black people were equal with whites.<sup>3</sup> Blair attended law school in Missouri, eventually becoming mayor of St. Louis and U.S. District Attorney for the state.<sup>4</sup> He represented Dred Scott in his unsuccessful Supreme Court appeal of his case against his enslaver, John Sanford. Blair argued that because Scott’s enslaver had taken him into a free state, Scott was free. The Supreme Court ruled against Scott 7-2, concluding that enslaved people could not be citizens and could not bring suits against the U.S. government.

### Lincoln’s Cabinet

Blair campaigned for Lincoln’s election in 1860 and was appointed to Lincoln’s cabinet as Postmaster General in 1861. His focus was efficiency and standardization: Blair instituted free mail delivery, standard postage rates, money orders, and railway postal cars. As a cabinet member, Blair frequently clashed with his colleagues. One historian called him “egotistical, voluble, and indiscreet,”<sup>5</sup> while a journalist wrote in December 1863 that Blair was, “the meanest man in the whole government.”<sup>6</sup>

Blair, like Lincoln, was staunchly pro-Union and anti-secession. Although initially against it, he eventually supported Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation because he believed it would deprive secessionist states of their most valuable assets: the labor of those who their citizens enslaved.<sup>7</sup> But Blair did not support abolition from a moral standpoint. As one historian wrote, Blair harbored “...not a trace of the abolitionist spirit. True, he had won the respect of some abolitionists by serving as counsel for the slave Dred Scott, but...His racist convictions were as strong as his Unionists convictions, and these were strong indeed.”<sup>8</sup> Those racist convictions were likely the product of his upbringing: Blair’s father, Francis Preston Blair, enslaved 15 people at his estate, called Silver Spring, in 1860.<sup>9,10</sup>

Blair believed strong that colonization—sending formerly enslaved people away from the United States to live in places like Haiti or the Chiquiri Province in Panama—was a solution to what our church historian Mildred Newbold Getty called (in 1965!), “the problem of the American Negro.”<sup>11</sup> He also argued that former slaveholders should be paid reparations for the loss of their property.

### Connections to Grace Church

Blair was an original congregant at Grace after the congregation’s founding in 1863. He served as a vestry member from 1869 until his death in 1883, and as a delegate to the Maryland Diocese more than a dozen times between 1866 and 1870. Blair also acted in the role of “lay reader” as often as twice a month at Grace, when then-rector Rev. James Battle Avirett was leading services at mission churches such as St. John’s, Norwood. The role of lay reader was more involved and prominent than that of a present-day lector; Blair would have conducted most of the service, including preaching a sermon.

**What might this have meant for the people filling Grace’s pews?** In *To Light the Way*, Mildred Newbold Getty’s uncritical 1965 history of our church, the chapter on Montgomery Blair states that he was “a deeply religious man, and his moral character was beyond reproach.”<sup>12</sup> We may never know the content of the sermons Blair delivered, but we do know the content of a speech he delivered in Rockville in October 1863. Speaking to a crowd of like-minded Republicans, he argued that pro-Union Republicans like themselves were, “menaced by the ambition of the ultra-Abolitionists... the Abolition party...seek to make a caste of another color by amalgamating the black element with the free white labor of our land... they would make the manumission of the slaves the means of infusing their blood into our whole system by blending with it ‘amalgamation, equality, and fraternity’”<sup>13</sup> More simply: Blair warned against the integration of formerly enslaved people into wider society on the grounds that they would contaminate it.

This chillingly racist rant wasn’t delivered to a Grace Church audience. But it was delivered by the same man who our earliest congregants respected as their lay reader for nearly 20 years.

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<sup>1</sup>Ancestry.com. 1850 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com

<sup>2</sup> Petition of Francis P. Blair, May 27, 1862, <https://civilwardc.org/texts/petitions/cww.00483.html>

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Grace N. “The Blair Family in the Civil War.” *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society* 38, no. 125 (1940): 280–94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23371598>.

<sup>4</sup> Getty, Mildred Newbold. *A History of Grace Episcopal Church, Silver Spring, Maryland*. (Grace Church, 1965); 71

<sup>5</sup> Niven, John. *Gideon Welles: Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy*. (Oxford University Press, 1973), 471.

<sup>6</sup> Burlingame, Michael, ed. *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks*. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 97-98.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, Grace N. “The Blair Family in the Civil War (Continued).” *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society*, vol. 39, no. 126, 1941, p. 57. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23371641>.

<sup>8</sup> Current, Richard Nelson. *Lincoln and the First Shot*. (Waveland Press, Inc., reprint edition, 1990), 27

<sup>9</sup> Ancestry.com. 1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules [database online]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com

<sup>10</sup> <https://househistree.com/houses/silver-spring-mansion>

<sup>11</sup> Getty 1965, 73

<sup>12</sup> Getty 1965, 71

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1863/10/17/archives/judge-blairs-speech-the-attack-of-the-postmastergeneral-on-the.html>