
Alexander Black and His World, 1857–1935

Part I: 1857–1877

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Introduction

The name Alexander Black may elicit positive but somewhat vague associations among many people familiar with Blacksburg, Virginia, or the large university there now known as Virginia Tech. Hesitancy is understandable since the town was officially founded and named in 1798 by pioneer members of the Black family. That family followed the custom of reusing earlier names, including Alexander, to celebrate the memory of previous ancestors both maternal and paternal.

The subject matter of this two-part study is the Alexander Black who was born in Blacksburg on April 30, 1857, and died there on March 27, 1935, after a long business career in his hometown. Widely known as Alex Black, this genial businessman left behind him two notable and highly visible results of his labors that remain viable contributions to the local community today. One is the banking institution known since 1922 as the National Bank of Blacksburg. It was founded by Alexander Black and several fellow businessmen under a state charter granted in 1891 and bore the name Bank of Blacksburg. It was the first publicly owned bank to open in Montgomery County since the Civil War. Black was selected the first president of this bank and continued to hold that office until his death in 1935.¹ The second thriving memorial to his life and work is the Alexander Black House, which since 2015 has housed the Blacksburg Museum and Cultural Foundation. The building itself was erected in the 1890s after fire destroyed Black's earlier house. This impressive home, built on South Main Street in the heart of the town business district, was an unprecedented multistory Queen Anne Victorian structure, complete with a rounded tower on one end and many decorative elements. While it was basically a wooden house on a stone foundation, it was an eye-catching departure from prevailing architectural styles in Blacksburg. Previous buildings ranged from utilitarian one- or two-story wood frame buildings to brick or wooden structures, some quite elegant, imitative of colonial, federal, or ante-bellum styles.²

These two tangible testimonies to the enduring contributions and influence of Alexander Black in his home region both took visible form in the 1890s. The intangible formation of the man himself began much earlier, in his birth to an influential and comfortable middle class family, his childhood experiences overshadowed by the Civil War, and his years of education at institutions that his own father had a major role in creating. The present article, dealing with his family background, childhood, and youth through the end of his student years at Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, forms Part I of a study of Alexander Black and the world he knew. Part II, to be published later, will discuss his long career in business, banking, and community involvement, in addition to elements of his personal and family life until his death in 1935.

Family Background and Early Influences

If the boy is to some extent father to the man, then it is worthwhile to explore the formative elements surrounding the young Alexander Black, particularly with regard to his family and community environment. Alex Black was the son of Dr. Harvey Black (1827–1888) and his wife, Mary Kent Black, known to her family as Mollie (1836–1911). They were married on September 15, 1852, and settled into a pleasant house with a large garden on North Main Street in a small town of approximately 400 people in Montgomery County in the Allegheny Mountains west of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Yet to think of them as products of a closed, in-grown local society would be erroneous.

Harvey was born in Blacksburg to the family of Scottish descent who had been very early settlers, large landowners, and official founders of the town in the last half of the 1700s.³ Many family members, especially those engaged primarily in agriculture, readily pushed onward along the expanding American frontier, leaving Blacksburg hundreds of miles behind. Harvey Black's own parents, Alexander and Elizabeth MacDonald Black, followed this path as they departed in the late 1840s, with several of the younger of their 12 children, to settle on the Wisconsin frontier. By then Harvey, the second born child, was an adult and had chosen a middle-class profession best based in a town and was completing his medical studies. He had volunteered and served in the U.S. Army medical branch during the Mexican War and afterwards toured Midwestern states to locate military bonus lands due him for his service. Altogether he visited more than a half-dozen other states, including Illinois and Ohio. Having explored other possible locations, he chose Blacksburg and Virginia for his home and career.

Mollie Black, too, had traveled before settling down; in fact, she was born in northern Illinois in the frontier settlement of Rockford. Her mother, Arabella Amiss Kent, belonged to the Amiss family of Montgomery County and Blacksburg; her family had both large landholdings and important business interests in town (including a hotel on Main Street). While visiting other relatives in Alabama, Arabella Amiss met her future husband. He was Germanicus Kent, who was born in Connecticut and had studied at Yale; however, he decided that economic opportunities and jobs lay southward.⁴ He became a cotton broker in Huntsville, Alabama, where the couple met and married. Subsequently they moved northward to join his brother, Aratus Kent, near the booming lead mining town of Galena, Illinois, and later helped found the town of Rockford. Their daughter, Mary Kent, was the first child of European descent known to have been born in that area; two sons followed soon after. The native peoples had been removed west of the Mississippi River through a disputed treaty process shortly after the Louisiana Purchase. Their last attempt to occupy their Illinois lands, under the leadership of Sauk chieftain Black Hawk, met defeat in 1832 at the hands of the U.S. Army and local militia.

Unfortunately the nascent business endeavors of Mollie's father collapsed as the expanding waves of the economic crisis begun in 1837 brought an end to easy credit and additional settlement. Within a few years, Arabella and Germanicus found refuge for their little family with the Amisses and new business opportunities in Blacksburg. Mollie made summer visits to other branches of her mother's far-flung family and may have visited her uncle and brothers in Illinois. Her father participated along with her Amiss relatives in founding the first bank in Montgomery County, the Blacksburg Savings Institution.⁵

Through their marriage, Harvey Black and Mary Kent Black brought together hitherto widely separated families and heritages based in northern as well as southern states and business as well as agriculture. Within nine years of their wedding, they had four lively children. First born was Kent Black (1853–1909); next came the only girl, Elizabeth Arabella Black (1855–1948), often called Lizzie or Lizzie Belle. Alexander Black was born in 1857 and two years later arrived the third son, Charles W. Black (1859–1925), usually called Charly (or Charley). One adult was added to their household in 1856 when Germanicus Kent, widowed for some five years, went to live with his daughter and his grandchildren until his death in 1862.

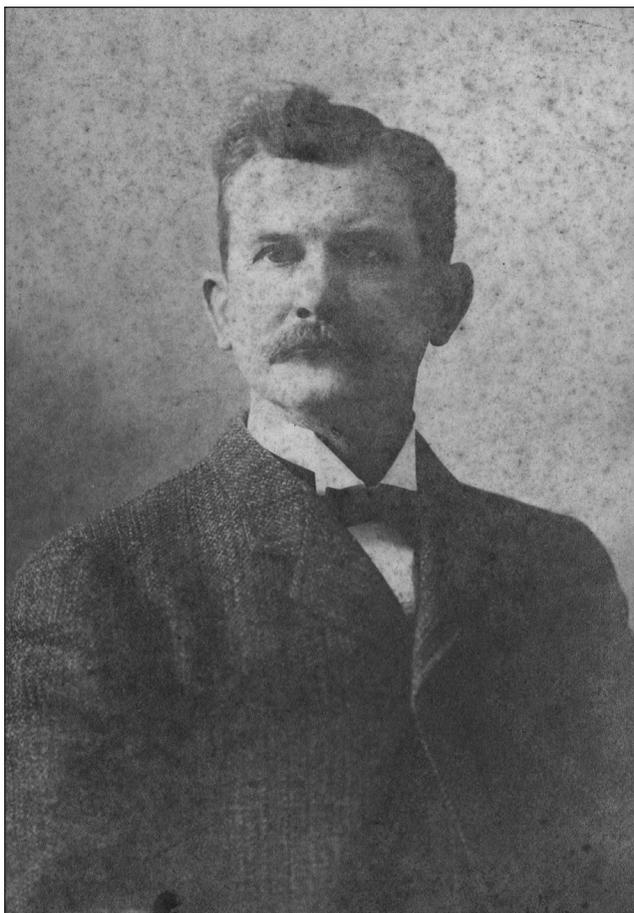
The census of 1860 showed another person living in the home, a young enslaved woman in her upper teens named Adeline. She did the cooking and most of the kitchen work, freeing Mollie to spend much of her time with the

children. Adeline had apparently been the property of Harvey Black's father, Alexander Black, who did not take her to Wisconsin with him because her extended birth family lived locally. Had Adeline gone to Wisconsin to live, she might have become a free person by virtue of the Northwest Ordinances passed in the early 1780s by the United States Congress operating under the Articles of Confederation, the first U.S. constitution. However, it might well have been difficult, especially for a young single woman, to assert her freedom in Virginia or Wisconsin.⁶

The Black children were fortunate to be born into an extended family who supported education for their own children and others, both female and male. The men in their family were among the supporters for creation of the Blacksburg Female Academy in 1840 and provided it a substantial brick building (by 1842) on town lots supplied by Black family members at a nominal price. Young Lizzie Black was a student there just before the Civil War began.⁷ A similar effort on behalf of an academy for boys and young men also developed and, in unison with local Methodists, gained support from the next-higher church level, the Baltimore Conference. The result was the Olin and Preston Institute, which opened in 1851.⁸ Kent Black pursued formal education here until the school closed shortly after the beginning of the Civil War. Harvey and Mollie Black were active members, teachers, and leaders in the local Methodist congregation; Alex Black remained a member of the same congregation for his entire life.

In many ways, Blacksburg and its surrounding area of Montgomery County were becoming a more vigorous and prosperous community in the 1850s, with good prospects for growth and economic progress. The area enjoyed a natural environment enabling production of varied products necessary and useful for human life. Mature original growth Appalachian forests abounded in the countryside outside town, which lay at an altitude of approximately 2,200 feet. Between the higher mountain ridges lay numerous fertile valleys and abundant sources of water. The climate was temperate and the growing season long enough for production of a variety of food crops for humans and livestock, particularly cattle. Hemp was once cultivated for fiber, but by 1860 had ceased to be a significant crop. The forests provided wood and animal products and the soil was underlain by stone for building and milling, accessible deposits of coal, and smaller amounts of metals and other minerals (including iron, manganese, sulfur, and salt).

On the other hand, disappointment had historically met those who attempted to replicate the eastern Virginia economic model of very large landholdings worked by a labor force of enslaved Africans to produce a single cash crop for shipment to distant markets in more populous areas of



Alexander Black as a young man (Papers of the Black, Kent, and Apperson Families, Mx1974-003, Special Collections, University Libraries, Virginia Tech).

America or Europe. There was no difficulty in producing valuable products in Montgomery County, as historian Daniel Thorp has succinctly noted, but it was impossible to move bulky agricultural and forest products to distant markets reliably and at costs low enough to preserve profits. The geography simply forbade such movement of large amounts of goods.⁹ The major roads were well maintained, but the need to ascend multiple slopes and then restrain heavy loads while descending, or to take long meandering routes to avoid obstacles, added time and required extra draft animals. Water transportation, so easily available in Tidewater Virginia, was out of the question; the streams were rapid, rocky, and shallow. Near Blacksburg the largest river, the New, turned north to cross even more mountainous terrain and emptied into the Ohio River rather than a convenient ocean. As

a result of these multiple factors, many families of European descent owned and worked their own small farms; large landowners typically practiced mixed agriculture and left many acres in forest or pastureland. The number of slaves was small in absolute terms, but they composed about one-fifth of the county's population.

The preceding scenario began to change rapidly in the 1850s, when businessmen in Lynchburg and local investors combined to extend a major rail line westward into and across Montgomery County and onward to Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee. This line, the Virginia and Tennessee, was completed in 1856 and linked these western areas by reliable, affordable transportation to Richmond and the Atlantic Ocean via Lynchburg's existing railroads. The effects upon the local economy were immediate, and ominous. Planters from exhausted lands to the east moved into the county and brought their enslaved workers with them. Local landowners, too, began to use more slaves to produce larger amounts of goods now easily marketable in eastern areas with larger populations. Local leaders who had previously resented and fought the political dominance of eastern slave owners over state government began to feel less antagonistic, especially since the reformed state Constitution of 1857 allowed, for the first time, almost universal suffrage for adult white males.¹⁰

The National Political Scene

Nationwide the increasingly strident political quarrel surrounding slavery and its expansion into new states grew apace, even as it seemed slavery might become a dominant factor in Blacksburg economic life. Local people were doubtless shaken in 1859 by the armed attempt of John Brown of Kansas to seize the United States arsenal at Harper's Ferry (then still a part of Virginia) and to begin a rebellion there among slaves and their sympathizers, using seized government weapons. Brown's intentions and the support given him by many citizens in Northern states accelerated the impetus for some political leaders in states of the Deep South to move toward secession and creation of a new, independent country. Nationwide, the impending presidential election of 1860 seemed to increase political polarization between sections of the U.S. In contrast, local residents showed no immediate rush to extremism, and at the polls they exhibited a desire for a political solution to be worked out.¹¹ Sadly, normal political discourse and activities were dissolving, as four parties presented presidential candidates in 1860.

The Republican Party organization could find no Virginians to serve as a slate of electors for Lincoln and thus voters there effectively had only three choices. In simplified terms, the Northern Democratic candidate,

Stephen Douglas of Illinois, favored allowing individual states to decide the question of slavery (a position called “popular sovereignty”). The Southern Democratic candidate, John Breckinridge of Kentucky, was clearly in favor of a Union which protected property rights as expressed in slavery and countenanced secession if an alternative became necessary. And John Bell of Tennessee represented the newly organized Constitutional Union Party composed of moderates and former Whigs. Bell and his supporters advocated “enforcement of the U.S. Constitution, the union of the states, and the enforcement of the laws.” Their major hope was to work out issues through the political process, chiefly through several amendments to the U.S. Constitution that would require some concessions on both sides.

Bell was the clear winner in Montgomery County, with 58.8 percent of the votes cast; Douglas received 6.1 percent, and Breckinridge won only 35.1 percent. Turnout was relatively high among the adult, white, male voters and could reasonably be considered representative. In fact, Bell won the popular vote across the entire state, albeit by a much smaller proportion, and he received all 15 of Virginia’s electoral votes.

Nationwide, of course, the result of the presidential election of 1860 was quite different. Lincoln achieved victory in the Electoral College, but he won just under 40 percent of the popular vote. Upon learning of this result, seven states of the Lower South immediately seceded and by early February 1861 had organized the Confederate States of America with Montgomery, Alabama, as its (temporary) capital. They chose a name—the Confederacy—that reminded Americans of the period of the Confederation, when each state could effectively veto acts of the U.S. government and there was no executive officer at its head. Extremists on both sides had carried the day in their own geographic regions, and those in the middle, politically and geographically, had little realistic hope of averting disaster.

Within weeks of his March 1861 inauguration, Lincoln launched a flotilla of naval vessels toward South Carolina. In response, Confederates in Charleston fired upon Fort Sumter (early April 1861) to compel its surrender before the U.S. naval vessels could resupply or reinforce the fortress, which commanded the city’s harbor. The U.S. president then called upon the individual states, including Virginia, to raise military forces to fight against the Confederacy, whose name he avoided using but whose acts of resistance to the U.S. he targeted. It was at this point that Virginia seceded from the United States in a decision ratified by the majority of the state’s voters. Three other “upper South” states did likewise. This special ballot showed a marked change in direction in Montgomery County, where the vote in favor of secession was recorded as unanimous. The later appearance of considerable

Unionist or anti-war sentiment in the county suggests this unanimity did not accurately reflect the considered opinion of all white males living there; some may have acted from momentary anger or intimidation.

A Civil War Childhood, 1861–1865

When the Civil War began, Alex Black was not quite 4 years old yet; his siblings were aged 8, 6, and 2. His father, Dr. Harvey Black, enlisted as a military surgeon along with troops from the western part of the state, and ultimately this regiment fell under the command of Col. Thomas Jonathan Jackson, soon to be a general and known as Stonewall. Dr. Black's visits home were rare, including one absence of over two years. Harvey and Mollie were forced to depend upon irregularly delivered letters and verbal messages passed by travelers to maintain some sense of home and family, while seeking solutions to mounting practical problems spawned by war. Some of their Civil War correspondence has survived and these letters, viewed in the context of Civil War events in Montgomery County and nearby counties, provide some insight into the home front as young Alexander Black and his siblings came to experience it. As in other cases, the number of surviving letters from the soldier by far outnumbered those surviving from his wife at home.¹²

The wartime experience of Alex Black was probably not so harsh as that of many Southern children; nevertheless it must have been stressful and dangerous. Fortunately for Blacksburg civilians, the most frequent local targets of United States Army attacks were located at least 15 miles or more from the town. The town's small size, lack of manufacturing, and its distance from railroad service were, for three years, sufficient reasons for the Federal forces to ignore Blacksburg. Ironically, the primary target of the U.S. military was destruction of the newly completed Virginia and Tennessee Railroad—the symbol of a modern industrialized economy—which ran through Montgomery County via the county seat of Christiansburg (south of Blacksburg) and crossed the New River on a 600 foot long bridge at nearby Radford to the southwest. A second priority of this U.S. strategy was to prevent salt produced at Saltville (approximately 95 miles west from Blacksburg by road) from reaching more populated areas, where it might become an ingredient in inferior gunpowder—or supply basic human and animal nutrition needs. Ultimately, Saltville became the single major source of salt for most of the Confederacy, a fact that intensified Federal attacks on Saltville itself and on the railroad.

Fortunately for Mollie and the four children, the Black family was affluent, had friends and relatives in the countryside who could help with

food, and appeared to benefit from widespread appreciation of Dr. Black's dedicated care of the local soldiers in the Virginia First Brigade. The first extant letter from Harvey to his "dear Wife" dates from April 4, 1862, and mingles general war news with domestic matters. Mollie Black's father, Germanicus Kent, had died in early March that year; his passing increased financial and family business issues for the parents to handle at a time when financial matters were in chaos due to the multiplicity of types of money in circulation. Harvey explained to his wife that he was sending her \$300 in the form of a certificate of deposit, which a friend stationed in Richmond in a clerical department had managed to obtain for them on an unnamed bank, thereby assuring her access to funds for family needs.¹³ For the children, Germanicus's death meant losing the only male authority figure remaining in the home at a time when their father had been absent for a year.

In a letter of April 23, 1862, Dr. Black revealed how thoughts of his family weighed on him. He confided it was difficult to write because his colonel (a lawyer and acquaintance from Montgomery County, Charles Roland) "has just been discussing what a boy Alex is, and some of them are trying to plague me about having so many children and so fast . . . I feel mighty proud of them. I don't think I would be half so good a soldier if I did not have so many little fellows to fight for."¹⁴ Alex would have been a week short of his fifth birthday at that point and perhaps impressed Ronald with his energy and exuberance. Harvey thought too of his youngest, declaring: "I know Charly is a smart little fellow. How I would like to hear him talk."¹⁵

Harvey must have been aware of the fear of invasion among the women and other civilians at home with his "little fellows," for on April 28, 1862, he began a new note addressing matters close to home. He had given instructions to "take care of business" to a relative escorting some discharged soldiers. "I also gave him the same instructions which I did you in case there should be an invasion of our county, which I have more hope now than heretofore will not be the case, for the [Federal] forces are needed at more important points that they may pass us by." His instructions may have been disquieting to his wife, alone and responsible for their four children's safety, to "burn everything that the enemy can appropriate" as an act of patriotism and devotion.¹⁶

The tone and topics of Dr. Black in his letter of May 2, 1862, indicate he had received a letter from his wife reporting that their youngest, 3-year-old Charly, had been very ill and for a time unable to swallow. Harvey wrote, "I hope he may yet recover and that an operation may be performed that may relieve him." Yet he agreed with Mollie's sentiment that she could give him up if that were "the will of Providence, . . . believing that he would

be a little angel in a better land.”¹⁷ The editor of the correspondence, Glenn L. McMullen, speculates that Charly had suffered a severe strep infection or tonsillitis. Harvey also reassured her that an actual attack upon Blacksburg was unlikely and that the rumor evidently going around town that the Confederacy would abandon the defense of Virginia entirely and withdraw southward to concentrate on saving its core area was untrue. He suggested that Virginia would never be abandoned and concluded that “I don’t hesitate to say that whip them we can and whip them we will.”¹⁸

In a letter of August 31, 1862, after the Battle of Second Manassas, Harvey wrote that the Stonewall Brigade had played a major role and “suffered severely” with “near 100 killed and wounded.” He supplied specific names of three Montgomery County men dead and two wounded. This enabled Mollie to pass on the names if families had not been officially informed, a service others must have appreciated and perhaps reciprocated in concrete ways, such as gifts of fresh food or needed services.¹⁹

A letter from Martinsburg a month later (September 26, 1862) found Harvey worried about the condition of many soldiers; he enjoined his wife to urge local farmers to produce all they could for the army. He then devoted a passage to each of his children, addressing good and bad behaviors and possible illnesses that Mollie must have shared with him in a letter subsequently lost. He praised Kent, 9 years old, for “standing head of his class.” Since the Olin and Preston Institute had ceased operation as its teachers and older students went to war, Kent may have attended classes conducted part-time by a clergyman, such as Rev. Charles Martin, whose school operated until 1872.²⁰ The other three children drew admonitions about less laudable behavior. One senses that, beyond acting like normal children, they were responding to the tension and fear that adults must have constantly exuded around them. Lizzie, age 7, was chided for talking “ugly” and told she “must learn to talk right” if she wanted people to like her. Alex, age 5, had apparently been having difficulty in concentrating on his lessons, whether from feeling ill in the summer heat or from a boyish tendency not to sit still for very long is uncertain. Harvey stated, “I am sure Alex will try to learn. The weather is getting cool now, and he can probably manage to sit up long enough to learn his lessons.” And lastly, young Charly, age 3, had, it seems, recovered from his serious illness and been rather unruly, for he complained that “Ma whips him too much.” Altogether it seems as if Mollie, who was essentially a “single mother” with four children and no other adult relative to assist her, had her hands full trying to uphold proper standards of behavior in a time of uncertainty and strain.

In a lost letter of March 1863, Mollie reported that she had been ill and that, luckily, her cousin Lizzie (Elizabeth Amiss Palmer, who lived a short walk away) had been able to stay with her and the children. In such ways the women and children of Blacksburg, especially those bound by family ties, managed while the men were gone. Harvey, replying on April 1, bemoaned the fact she had been ill and told an amusing story, perhaps intended to divert her.²¹ It ended with his passing out treats to his numerous smallpox patients, an inadvertent reminder that the scourge of war was not limited to military weapons but posed less visible dangers to everyone, particularly children and the aged. The resurgence of smallpox among numerous groups of soldiers was particularly worrying because, as Civil War historian James Robertson explains, “[T]he vaccination process was then so crude that it often produced pyemia and other forms of fatal blood poisoning.”²² Subjecting children to such a process was not an attractive option.

Despite their difficult circumstances, or perhaps because of them, Mollie in May 1863 proposed that she go visit Harvey at the field hospital (Guinea Station, Virginia) where he had been located for some time. The couple had not seen each other for more than two years, not since he had left for the war zone in April 1861. Harvey raised the question of who would care for the children and thought Kent might possibly come despite the amount of disease present; he did not want the younger children to visit. He noted that Kent had already had the measles and, presumably, was already immune to that dangerous childhood illness.²³ Kent, if not Mollie, was known to have visited his father in camp.

Only three of the letters written by Mollie have survived to the present. The first of her letters was begun on November 29, 1863, and had a long postscript added on December 1 when she learned a dispatch was being taken to Christiansburg and the train soon. This letter mingles talk about normal activities such as church affairs and getting new shoes for children with reports from the countryside of Yankee raids on unprotected homes, where soldiers stole everything valuable in the house and seized or destroyed all the food available. Yet life at home went on, if not exactly as usual. On that Sunday Mollie reported, “All the children but Charly have gone to church, so I feel lonely. . . . This is the first time that Alex has gone out at night.” Possibly this was the first time the 7-year old had been sent to evening service in the care of his sister, Lizzie, and older brother, Kent. Or she may have intended to convey that Alex was no longer furiously scratching and fidgeting from an attack of lice and thus fit to go out in public again. The lice problem had been made worse because the usual remedies were unavailable

and even soap, and tallow to make it, were difficult to obtain. Things had become so difficult that Mollie concluded that “something must be done before spring to bring peace.”²⁴

When the children outgrew their shoes, replacements required a long wait. Evidently Alex had been waiting for a new pair of “boots” for some time; meanwhile, “He wears a pair of Kent’s old last winter shoes that just keep his feet off the ground.” Through diligent inquiry, she learned that a young farm boy, Jim Linkous, had begun to make shoes and had finished two pairs.²⁵ Mollie engaged him in late December to make a pair for Lizzie Belle and then, for Christmas, Alex’s new boots. Mollie expressed her gratitude and declared, “Jimmy is a young hand. He has only made three pair, but he makes them very nice.”²⁶

At first, as foodstuffs grew scarce, the missing items were not absolutely essential, such as fine granulated sugar and imported coffee. A local officer obtained and distributed “some coffee and sugar” in late December 1863, and Mollie admitted she would have gladly taken some of the coffee had she been present “for I am tired of substitutes.” Far more serious, as U.S. Army raids came closer and closer, daily necessities such as flour, salt, meat, and tallow had become very difficult to obtain by any means. Their unavailability meant that the armed forces of both sides had been taking them, whether by payment or by force, from the rural population. A church member, a farmer named Earheart, reported that his family was down to half-rations.

During November and December, Mollie received friendly deliveries of wheat (twice for a total of 13 bushels) and of tallow (over 7 pounds). She or Adeline presumably had to personally process the grain and fat into more useable forms. She had raisins for the family’s traditional Christmas mincemeat pies and was anxiously awaiting delivery of meat the next day.

Fear of direct attack reached a peak in Blacksburg in the middle of December as U.S. troop movements increased in intensity, and scattered Confederate forces and home guards proved increasingly unable to stop them. In a letter written December 18, 1863, Mollie reported days and nights filled with fear: “Last night we all slept in our clothes, expecting the Yankees every minute.”²⁷ Evidently, because of the cold, they all huddled together in the parents’ big bed, ready to fly away when their neighbors rapped on the door. It was a near miss; the object of the hostile movements led by Lt. Col. William W. Averell (1832–1900) turned out to be the Roanoke County seat of Salem (about 15 miles eastward).²⁸ The damage reported there was considerable. Mollie thought that it would be at least a month before “the cars” (the railroad cars) could run again to Christiansburg; this left most of the county more isolated than ever.

The children were showing the effects of the conditions they were enduring. According to Mrs. Black, “[W]e may expect them [the Yankees] back any time. The children were very much frightened.” The youngest, Charly, age 4, gave voice to that fear and anger as well. He reportedly had shouted in a rage, “[I]f ever he was a man, he would kill all the Yankees, soldiers & the government too, so his Pa could come home.”²⁹ The choice of “if” (not “when”) Charly made it to manhood seems telling, whether the four-year old or his mother, in writing, chose that word.

Cessation of Local Warfare and Occupation of Blacksburg in May 1864

The end of the fighting and worst privations may have come as a relief to local civilians, even though that entailed U.S. military occupation of the town and surrounding countryside in May of 1864. On May 9, 1864, another Federal military effort to permanently shut down operations on the Tennessee and Virginia Railroad led to a brief but quite bloody battle at Cloyd’s Mountain near Dublin, in neighboring Pulaski County. Lasting only about one hour, the vicious encounter produced some 1,200 combined dead and wounded. At its conclusion, the U.S. forces were able to achieve their long-term goals by marching to Radford and collapsing the railroad bridge over the New River (May 10) and then occupying the surrounding areas to prevent efforts at repairs or detours. The main body of the Federal forces then marched eastward.

Gen. George R. Crook (1830–1890) and his men arrived in Blacksburg on May 11, 1864, and began to set up an occupation headquarters and a field hospital in two large houses just east of Main Street, a few blocks from the Blacks’ home. Originally intent on creating headquarters at the home of Mollie’s Amiss and Palmer cousins (now known as Mountain View), the military staff moved to the vacant school building of the Olin and Preston Institute upon learning that only women lived at the first address. On May 12, a second wave of U.S. soldiers under Averell passed through town heading back into West Virginia. As these soldiers marched, they “visited” homes, “confiscating food and valuables from the local citizenry.” Some residents reported that they spitefully destroyed food that they could not carry with them.³⁰ To what extent Alex Black (then age 8) and his siblings understood the meaning of the soldiers taking over familiar buildings in town is today unknown, yet it must have been a memory that remained with them for many years. Fear of attack, however, was over and by slow degrees more normal life, at least as remembered by adults, returned.

Education and Young Adult Years to 1877

The war continued almost another year, and Dr. Harvey Black was present at Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865. Upon his return home, he spent the years after the war continuing the career and interests he had developed earlier. He took part in the effort to reopen the Methodist school for boys and young men in Blacksburg, which had closed early in the war. Education of local children had suffered severely for the years of conflict and reopening pre-war schools was no easy matter in the postwar years of financial chaos. The Methodist school reopened in 1868 and in 1869 gained a new charter and a slightly different name (Preston and Olin Institute). Numerous students enrolled, but it was difficult to find qualified staff and the school continued to face challenging conditions.³¹

For young Alexander Black, who had his fourth birthday a few weeks after the war began, attendance at a regular school with trained teachers was not possible until he was about 10 or 11 years old. When the Methodist school reopened in 1868–1869, all three of the Black brothers entered along with several other local students; in 1870 enrollment totaled 99. However, many students were not adequately prepared for the institute's regular college preparatory courses, in which "Latin, Greek, mathematics, natural science, and moral philosophy and English" composed the five major divisions. Large numbers of students, such as Alexander and Charles Black, were necessarily placed in the "primary and preparatory division" because they lacked the level of education that had been, in pre-war times, appropriate for their ages.

After Virginia was readmitted as a state of the United States effective January 1870, it was freed from military occupation and became subject to the normal application of all federal laws. Of great interest was the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, which provided federal financial support for the creation of state college level programs or institutions especially for mechanical and agricultural education. The General Assembly lost little time in obtaining Virginia's share, which was supplied in the form of federal scrip redeemable in publicly owned lands. A state could choose the land itself and sell or develop it to raise funds. Alternatively, a state could sell the scrip representing its land claim to raise funds quickly.

With a large state debt already weighing upon the budget, Virginia apparently decided upon a quick route to the money. In Richmond, "legislators in the 1870–1871 session argued on and on about the land grant money." In 1872, the Virginia Board of Education was authorized to sell the land scrip for all 300,000 acres; a single investor in Cleveland, Ohio, purchased all of the scrip for 285,000 dollars (about 95 cents per acre).

This money was invested at 5 percent interest in state bonds, producing the annual flow of funds for the land grant colleges. The March 1872 Virginia statute designating the state's two land grant colleges describes and divides "the annual interest accruing from the proceeds of the land scrip donated to the state of Virginia by act of Congress" and further describes this money as "the said annuity" to be paid to the Blacksburg and Hampton Colleges.³² Numerous communities petitioned to receive the new college; the story has been well told elsewhere how leaders in Blacksburg and Montgomery County secured the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College. The first VAMC building was the main hall of Preston and Olin Institute, which ceased to exist and whose property was donated to the land grant college, thereby creating a ready-made campus. VAMC opened its doors for the first fall session in 1872, with Dr. Harvey Black serving as the first rector of its board of visitors. Over the decades, it underwent several name changes and is now familiarly known as Virginia Tech.³³

In this fashion and partly resulting from his father's efforts, Alex Black and many young men across Virginia gained the benefit of a major state-supported college that offered traditional college subjects in addition to its specific mission of offering more practical mechanical, engineering, and agricultural courses. Three of the students enrolled in the original session of 1872–1873 were Kent, Alexander, and Charles Black. The Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College also faced the challenging fact that many students had not already received the education young men of their age would have attained in times of peace. Many of them needed remedial coursework, while others of the same age were prepared for more advanced material. By the same token, the enrollments of the earliest years were relatively large, as a pent-up surge of young men of various ages, previously unable to continue their educations, seized the opportunities offered at VAMC. The official *VAMC Catalog*³⁴ for the first session listed 132 students enrolled, the second session (1873–1874) listed 194 students, the third session (1874–1875) counted 222, and the fourth session (1875–1876) attained a high of 255 students (including 13 from out of state). A reverse effect began in the fifth session (1876–1877) with only 224, and then a steeper decline occurred, as the sixth session (1877–1878) registered only 186 students and the seventh 160. Each session, the student body was evaluated and divided into three levels of study: junior, intermediate, and senior; students remained at each level until prepared for the more demanding work of the next level.

VAMC initially offered two concentrated courses of study, agriculture and mechanics. The courses required for each, as described in the early

catalogs, required advanced work in mathematics, chemistry, biology, physics, and other fields. In the 1870s, relatively few students completed either three-year curriculum, even though each 10-month-long school year provided far more instructional time than a typical modern college year of two semesters each about four months long. Many early enrollees probably lacked the time or advanced mathematical preparation required for senior level classes.

It is also likely that a segment of the student population pursued a more general selection of courses covering course content similar to liberal arts college coursework. (By 1886, these students would have found a complete “General Course” curriculum to pursue.³⁵) For example, all students were required to study French or German; in addition, Latin and Greek instruction was available upon request. Other fields useful to careers in agriculture or other professions were offered in the middle level classes, such as bookkeeping, record keeping, surveying, common food plants and animals and their care, agricultural economics, and so forth. Indeed, every course that instructed a future farmer how to evaluate his land; to select and cultivate appropriate crops, orchards, and animals; or how to use modern equipment and chemicals also instructed the future operator of a local general store, hardware store, or “feed and seed” store what products he should stock and how to price those items. VAMC was fortunate to have an “experimental farm” of over 200 acres nearby, providing real life experience that benefitted both the farmer in training—as well as the future businessman who never had lived in the country or worked in a family business.

A closer look at Alex Black and his brothers is revealing of the complicated situation. All three of them began classes at VAMC in its first session, beginning in 1872. Alex was 15 years of age, Charles only 13, and Kent 19. Kent had the greatest educational experience already and was clearly focused on a career, to practice medicine as his father did. Studying Latin, biology, and chemistry helped prepare him for medical school. He cultivated leadership skills and self-confidence by participating in the required military exercises; the opening of the third session in 1874 found him a first lieutenant in the cadet corps. This was also his last session at VAMC as he went on to medical school the following year. Youngest brother Charles arrived at VAMC with the least formal education and a disjointed early childhood. Based on his age alone, he doubtless needed some additional preparatory classes to enable him to participate fully in the junior or intermediate college level classes. He attended classes for three years and then did not enroll again.

Alex Black entered VAMC at the age of 15 with less formal education than his older brother Kent but probably better prepared in terms of schooling and added maturity than Charles. Like Kent, Alex participated in the required military elements with some distinction, and by the beginning of his third session (1874–1875), he held the rank of sergeant in the cadet organization, a rank he retained for the following session. In his fourth and fifth years, his home county was listed as James City, reflecting the fact that his parents had moved the family home to be close to Dr. Black's new position as superintendent of the state's Eastern Lunatic Asylum in Williamsburg.

While Alex undoubtedly missed his parents, sister, and brothers, he had found a congenial group of friends on campus, most particularly in the local chapter of Pi Kappa Alpha Fraternity, which had been founded in 1874. He went on to serve the fraternity as its president in the 1876–1877 session, his fifth and last year at VAMC. As noted above, he did not follow a specialized program, pursuing instead the types of courses that would best suit him for the life of a businessman and citizen in his own hometown. After strengthening the foundation of his education, he may have discovered some of the upper level courses took a larger and more philosophical view of the interrelationship of various major types of resources and economic sectors working together. In his senior agriculture lecture class, Professor M. G. Ellzey devoted one-third of his time to “General Considerations of the business of farming and rural economy, including all important agricultural specialties . . . closing with the discussion of the relations of Agriculture to commerce, manufactures, labor, government, taxation, and etc.” The course in Mental and Moral Philosophy of President Charles L. C. Minor set forth large themes and issues including political economy.³⁶ The term political economy had been used for centuries to describe what one might today label a combination of macroeconomics, public policy, social and economic systems, and global economics. Thoughtful businessmen and bankers could in future find guidance in such discussions.

Alexander Black left VAMC at age 20 with satisfaction and appreciation for his experiences there. Attachment to his college friends and his *alma mater* may have made easier his decision to live and work in Blacksburg. As the years passed, he cultivated friendships and business connections not only among other alumni but with faculty and administrators from the campus. As the campus grew and offered more activities open to the public, he enjoyed the intellectual and social stimulation of special lectures, campus dances and concerts, and other activities. Numerous young men

from Montgomery County and nearby enrolled each year at VAMC and the Catalog of Students during Alex's years there includes many familiar names of businessmen or kinsmen, including Henderson, Francisco, Hoge, Kiester, Kipps, Stanger, Thomas, Kanode, Miller, Lawrence, Lybrook, McDonald, and others. According to the obituary published in 1935 by the university's official newsletter, *The Techgram*, Alexander Black "served for several years as an officer of the General Alumni Association" and as "a member of the board of directors [visitors] for many years. He has always been prominently identified with alumni affairs."³⁷ The second part of this study of Alexander Black will explore his career as business and community leader from the conclusion of his education until his death. The upcoming second article will discuss numerous specific examples of his ongoing relationships with individual alumni, with the institution as an economic and legal entity, and with the wider community of Blacksburg and Montgomery County.

Endnotes

1. Sherry Joines Wyatt, "Business and Commerce: Community Centers and Places of Profit," in Mary Elizabeth Lindon, ed., *Virginia's Montgomery County* (Christiansburg, Va.: Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Arts Center, 2009), 396–397. Two Blacksburg men, druggist W. B. Conway and former pastor Essiah Hubbert, in 1889 had briefly opened a private bank backed only by their own resources; both men terminated this operation and joined in creation of the Bank of Blacksburg in 1891.
2. See the official website at www.blacksburg.gov/index.aspx?page=65 and associated pages. The Alexander Black House Museum and Blacksburg Cultural Center state that the home was built in 1897, based on primary documents of that date. A conflicting date of 1892 or 1893 was suggested in the decades following Alexander Black's death but seems to lack primary documentation. This conflict will be addressed later in another volume of *The Smithfield Review*.
3. For details of the early life of Harvey Black and his wife's background, see details in Glenn L. McMullen, ed., *A Surgeon With Stonewall Jackson: The Civil War Letters of Dr. Harvey Black* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 1995). The original letters of Dr. and Mrs. Black are part of the valuable holdings on the Black Family in *Papers of the Black, Kent, and Apperson Families*, Ms74-003, Special Collections, University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Va.
4. Details on Germanicus Kent and his family are found in Taylor Decker, *Germanicus A. Kent: Founder of Rockford, Illinois, 1834* (Rockford, Ill.: Rockford Historical Society, 1981); also online at tinkercottagemuseum.wordpress.com/tag/germanicus-kent as well as similar en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germanicus.Kent.
5. Wyatt, "Business and Commerce," 387–388, 391–392. Germanicus Kent was no known blood relation to James Randle Kent, largest landowner in the county, who also participated in the creation of the bank.
6. McMullen, *Civil War Letters*, suggests this is why young Adeline remained behind. The Congress that operated under the Articles of Confederation is the government that defeated the British, signed the Treaty of Paris, and passed major legislation (called Ordinances) that created the Northwest Territory, forbade slavery there, convinced large states to give up huge land claims to the United States as a whole, provided for the creation of new states, and created the orderly survey of public lands. Under the Confederation there was no executive or judicial branch; each

- state had one vote in Congress and unanimity was required on issues considered important. In 1857, the Supreme Court created by the Constitution ratified in 1789 ruled that Congress could not prohibit masters from transporting their slaves to a new state and continuing their ownership (Dred Scott decision).
7. Clara B. Cox, "Blacksburg Educates Its Children, 1740s–1990s," *A Special Place for 200 Years: A History of Blacksburg, Virginia*, ed. Clara B. Cox (Roanoke, Va.: Town of Blacksburg, Va., 1998), 82–83.
 8. Cox, "Blacksburg Educates Its Children," 83–85.
 9. Daniel Thorp, "'Learn your wives and daughters how to use the gun and pistol': The Secession Crisis in Montgomery County, Virginia," *The Smithfield Review* 17 (2013), 76.
 10. The impact of a major railroad line entering the mountainous counties of what is now Southwest Virginia and its attendant stimulus to the production of cash crops and the expanded use of enslaved workers have been explored for the region as a whole by Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis in the Civil War* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1994, and later edition by University of Alabama Press, 2003). Thorp, "Secession Crisis," demonstrates that in many ways Montgomery County fits well with Noe's overall thesis.
 11. Thorp, "Secession Crisis," 78–83, gives a clear overview of the election and its aftermath.
 12. James Robertson, ed., "A Floyd County Family in Wartime," *The Smithfield Review* 16 (2012), 29. Robertson notes that not only did few soldiers' letters survive, but "[e]ven more rare in Civil War literature are letters to soldiers from wives. They either tended to be lost in the chaos of army life or else destroyed by addressees for the sake of privacy." Unfortunately for historians, the Blacks' correspondence follows this prevalent pattern.
 13. *Civil War Letters*, 23; letter dated April 4, 1862, Harvey to Mollie.
 14. *Civil War Letters*, 27; letter dated April 23, 1862, Harvey to Mollie.
 15. *Civil War Letters*, 28; letter dated April 23, 1862, Harvey to Mollie.
 16. *Civil War Letters*, 29, 30; letter dated April 23, 1862, Harvey to Mollie.
 17. *Civil War Letters*, 31; letter dated May 2, 1862, Harvey to Mollie.
 18. *Civil War Letters*, 33; letter dated May 2, 1862, Harvey to Mollie.
 19. *Civil War Letters*, 38–39; letter dated August 31, 1862, Harvey to Mollie.
 20. *Civil War Letters*, 40, 42; letter dated September 26, 1862, Harvey to Mollie. Cox, "Blacksburg Educates Its Children," 85, 83.
 21. *Civil War Letters*, 47, 49; letter dated April 1, 1863, Harvey to Mollie.
 22. Robertson, "A Floyd County Family in Wartime," 32, note 20.
 23. *Civil War Letters*, 53; letter dated May 31, 1863, Harvey to Mollie.
 24. *Civil War Letters*, 75, 76; letters dated November 29, 1863, and December 1, 1863, Mollie to Harvey.
 25. The Linkous family were descended from German soldiers who served as British mercenaries during the Revolutionary War. They had been held as prisoners of the Americans near Charlottesville, Va., for a time and then released to make their way westward to become agricultural settlers in Montgomery County. Their story is recorded by descendant Clovis Linkous in volume 5 of the *The Smithfield Review*.
 26. *Civil War Letters*, 78; letter dated December 22, 1863, Mollie to Harvey.
 27. *Civil War Letters*, 77–78; letter dated December 18, 1863, Mollie to Harvey.
 28. Averell was promoted to full colonel for his actions in this raid. *Civil War Letters*, 81; letter dated December 22, 1863, Mollie to Harvey.
 29. *Civil War Letters*, 80, December 22 addition to letter dated December 18, 1863, Mollie to Harvey.
 30. The account of troop movements and of the battles is drawn primarily from The Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, "Battle of Cloyd's Mountain," accessed August 20, 2016, www.civilwar.vt.edu. For events in town, see Dorothy H. Bodell and Mary Elizabeth Lindon, "Blacksburg during the Civil War," *A Special Place for 200 Years: A History of Blacksburg, Virginia*, ed. Clara B. Cox (Roanoke, Va.: Town of Blacksburg, 1998), 26-29.

31. Details of Harvey Black's later life from editor Glenn McMullen's explanatory material in *Civil War Letters*, 9–11. Cox, "Olin and Preston Institute and Preston and Olin Institute: The Early Years of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University: Part II," *The Smithfield Review* 20 (2016), 10-11.
32. Descriptions of legislative battles over the money and the quotation from the March 1872 statute are given in Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History* (Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 224, 226. Discussion of sale of all of the scrip to an Ohio businessman at on-line archive site spec.lib.vt.edu/archives/databook/text/chap1/1-2htm.
33. Wallenstein, *Cradle of America*, 221–28, discusses the controversy over land grant colleges on the state level and the inclusion of Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in a share of the public funds. Later, the black land grant college designation was moved to Virginia State when it was founded. For the planning and personnel from Blacksburg's viewpoint, see Cox, "Olin and Preston Institute and Preston and Olin Institute," 1–26.
34. The official *Catalog* for each session offers valuable information, such as the number of total enrollments, a Catalog of Students listing their names and counties of family residence, and a description of requirements for each specialization and for each classification level. Photocopies of the early *Catalogs* are available at Special Collections, University Libraries, Virginia Tech.
35. *Catalogue [sic] of Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1886–1887*, 15.
36. As described in the *Catalog* each year 1873 through 1876.
37. Details given in the obituary published in the university newsletter, *The Techgram*, May 1935; clipping in Papers of Black, Kent, and Apperson Families in Special Collections, University Libraries, Virginia Tech. Alexander Black's continued association with other alumni and college staff, as well as attendance at campus events, will be shown in Part II of this study in a forthcoming volume of the *The Smithfield Review*.