

CHAPTER IV

DISSENT, SURVIVAL AND RECOVERY

The Elections of 1856 to 1868

The United States was beset by economic, social and political turmoil from 1850 to 1870 with the Civil War rocking the very foundations of the country. Sectional and parochial interests dominated national issues and, from the Compromise of 1850 to the Congressional Reconstruction Acts, the nation whirled through its most perilous period. Maryland likewise found itself spinning during this tumultuous period but the directions it took were frequently out of sync with the rest of the country.

Only in the wartime presidential election of 1864 did Maryland voting reflect national statistics and this result can be viewed as tainted by the election practices in effect for that contest. In 1856 Maryland was the only state in the union which voted for the American Know-Nothing candidate, Millard Fillmore. In 1860, Maryland voters heavily preferred the splinter candidacies of Southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge and Constitutional Union John Bell to the major national parties represented by the Democrat Stephen A. Douglas and Republican Abraham Lincoln. In 1868, Maryland strongly rejected the Republican policies and its war hero nominee, General Grant. The state voted for Democrat Horatio Seymour by more than a two to one margin of victory, a result 20 percentage points different from the national vote which favored Grant by 52.7 to 47.3 percent.

Why Maryland reacted in such radical departure from the national norm during this period is inextricably related to its unique composition as a border slave state containing one of the nation's most thriving mercantile centers, Baltimore City and its port. According to the 1860 Federal census Maryland had a total population of 687,049. This included 87,189 slaves (the largest number of any state which did not secede from the union) and 83,942 free blacks (the largest number for any state prior to the Civil War). The City of Baltimore had grown to 169,054 inhabitants in 1850 with a jump to 212,418 occurring by 1860 as immigration through the port increased. These raw figures underscore the social, economic and political tensions of a state with cultural ties to the south and mercantile and business ties to the prosperous northeast and growing central states.¹

A rapidly changing society confronting threatening political issues led to the rise of the infamous Know-Nothing party in Maryland.² This political entity embraced the concept that "America should be run by native Americans," an idea which played upon the fears of an insecure voting public. The "political nativism" movement in Maryland can trace its origin to the 1840s but the growth of its secret societies or council did not occur until the disintegration and disorganization of the major political parties after the 1852 presidential election. The Know-Nothing party then began a meteoric rise to power as the dominant political force in Maryland. Surprisingly, the first electoral successes of the