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MANY VOICES, SIMILAR CONCERNS

Traditional Methods of African-American Political Activity in Norfolk, Virginia, 1865–1875

by Michael Hucles*

African-Americans in postbellum Norfolk, Virginia, as elsewhere, knew that merely gaining freedom through government action—the Confiscation Acts, Emancipation Proclamation, and Thirteenth Amendment—did not guarantee that they would be fairly treated. They therefore attempted to gain control of their lives through a vigorous affirmation of their rights. They began to record their antebellum marriages and normalize family relations, obtain an education, establish a base for economic prosperity, and participate in the political process. Through these actions they hoped to give true meaning to their freedom. Unfortunately, they were not always successful in their attempts.

One of the largest cities of the prewar South, Norfolk in 1860 had 14,610 residents, 4,319 of them African-Americans. Although the percentage of blacks had declined from 37 to 30 percent in the last antebellum decade, events of the Civil War reversed that trend. The

* Michael Hucles is an assistant professor of history at Old Dominion University. He would like to acknowledge the thoughtful comments by Harold Woodman of Purdue University and Earl Lewis of Michigan State University on earlier versions of this essay.

1 On the meaning of freedom, see Eric Foner, Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy (Baton Rouge, 1983).

2 U.S. Census Bureau, Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census (Washington, D.C., 1864), p. 519. The published population schedule of the Eighth Census (Table III) indicates a total African-American population in the city of 4,330, 1,046 “free colored” and 3,284 slaves. The enumeration of the free colored was incorrectly computed, because the published sexual breakdown totaled 358 males and 678 females, or 1,036. In addition, the individual schedules indicate that one member of the free colored was an Indian. If this person is removed from the African-American count, then the total black population of Norfolk in 1860 was 4,319, and the free black population count was 1,035. See U.S. Census Bureau, The Statistics of the Population of the United States (Washington, D.C., 1872), 1:281; U.S. Census Bureau, Eighth Census, 1860, Manuscript Population Schedules, Norfolk County (microfilm), RG 29, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as DNA); Howard N. Rabinowitz, “Continuity and Change: Southern Urban Development,
early liberation of Norfolk, and General Benjamin Butler's pronouncement at nearby Fort Monroe that runaway slaves would be considered contraband, gave hope to thousands of area slaves. Once Norfolk fell to Federal forces in 1862, the city became a refuge to many who sought freedom. Consequently, the African-American community in 1870 was substantially different from the one that confronted census enumerators in 1860. By 1870, in fact, the number of blacks in Norfolk had more than doubled since the last census to 8,765 people. Such an increase during the war years and after affected decisions made by both black community leaders and government officials.3

In an effort to aid the transition from slavery to freedom, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in March 1865. Among the responsibilities of the Freedmen's Bureau, as it was more popularly called, were the material and educational needs of blacks. The bureau did not aspire to organize an African-American political wing of the Republican party, though individual agents sometimes promoted such activity. Indeed, one bureau official, Edward Murphy, complained that his efforts to generate interest in establishing temperance societies fell on deaf ears because Norfolk blacks devoted "all their spare time and attention to Politics."4

Structurally, the bureau resembled a pyramid. Oliver Otis Howard, who held the title of commissioner, ran the bureau from his Washington, D.C., office. Each state was headed by an assistant commissioner (Orlando Brown in Virginia), while the various divisions in the state operated under the guidance of subassistant commissioners. Norfolk was part of the First District, directed initially by C. H. Beirne. After his four-month tenure ended in June 1865, A. S. Flagg replaced him at the helm for one year. Flagg's successors included William P. Austin (June 1866–March 1867) and J. H. Remington (March 1867–January 1869). Much of the routine office work, however, was carried out by the awkwardly titled assistant subassistant commissioner. Between 1865 and 1867 three men held this post in Norfolk—John H. Keatley, Charles E.

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3 U.S. Census Bureau, Ninth Census, 1870, Manuscript Population Schedules, Norfolk County. See also U.S. Census Bureau, Tenth Census, 1880, Manuscript Population Schedules, Norfolk County; U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880) (Washington, D.C., 1883), 1:425.

4 For an account of the work of the bureau, see William S. McFeely, Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen (New Haven, 1968). See also Edward Murphy to Orlando Brown, 31 July 1867, in Press Copies of Letters Sent, March–November 1867, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, RG 105, DNA.
Between 1860 and 1870, the number of blacks in Norfolk, shown here from Granby Street in 1868, more than doubled to 8,765.

Johnston, and Edward Murphy. It was their responsibility to sign the directives, contracts, and other communiqués of the local office.5

Black Norfolkians did not rely solely on the bureau to secure their newly won rights. They exercised their constitutionally provided right of petition to declare their concerns and to define their visions of the future. Indeed, they did not wait for the implementation of the bureau’s program to express their political apprehensions. On 4 April 1865, a month after the bureau’s creation and five days before Appomattox, free blacks and former slaves met in Mechanics’ Hall to demand that African-Americans be granted full participation in the newly restored civil authority in the city. Their concern over citizenship translated into a quest for universal male suffrage and spurred the formation of the Colored Monitor Union Club, which gave organization to their political ambitions. Later the Union League, a group established during the war by northern whites who supported Abraham Lincoln’s policies but that soon became a

Black Norfolkians sought to secure their newly won rights through the ballot box and through economic pressure. A group of African-Americans declared in April 1865 that "traitors shall not dictate or prescribe to us the terms or conditions of our citizenship, so help us God."

vehicle to promote the Republican party among southern freedmen, especially after 1867, assumed the role of leading political organization among Norfolk's black population.6

As southern governments began creating Black Codes to define the rights and responsibilities of newly freed blacks, Norfolk's African-Americans determined at their meeting in April that "traitors shall not dictate or prescribe to us the terms or conditions of our citizenship, so help us God." In translating their political aspirations into specific strategies to achieve equality, black Norfolkians from the start linked economic pressure to political agitation by threatening not to "patronize

or hold business relations with those who deny to us our equal rights." Certainly, the use of economic pressure to win political equality was and remains a popular strategy for black Americans, but the success of this particular instance is uncertain. In addition, it is unclear whether at that time such a localized threat could have had a wider influence, especially because different black communities concentrated on different goals. Boycotting particular businesses that discriminated in a specific locale provided black Norfolkians the opportunity to make a statement concerning the condition of blacks everywhere, but unless such a movement spread beyond the boundaries of the city, its universal repercussions could become lost.7

Suffrage therefore became a logical goal for those schooled in political activism. In Norfolk, the Colored Monitor Union Club and later the Union League found a supportive and sympathetic audience among the city’s black residents. African-Americans pressed the suffrage issue and exerted a significant influence beyond their own borders when Virginia's provisional governor called for new state assembly elections. Black Norfolkians viewed this coming election as a chance to challenge the white hegemony and their own inability to vote. Gathering at the Bute Street African Methodist Episcopal Church on election day, 25 May 1865, only a month and a half after Lee's surrender, nearly one thousand black men and women assembled to test the political waters.8

As the election proceeded, these political activists sent scouting parties to the various wards throughout the city to determine whether they would be allowed to vote. They discovered that in one ward blacks could place their names on a list to contest the election. The other wards refused to allow them to do anything. Those who lived in the one promising ward immediately began to leave the church in small groups to place their names alongside those already enumerated. In all, black voters of this ward cast 354 votes for their choices. The remainder of the black males in the church cast a separate vote, thus demonstrating their determination to achieve what they had earlier resolved, ‘‘equal rights of suffrage at the ‘ballot box.’ ’’9

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7 Harding, There Is a River, p. 295; see also Foner, Reconstruction, p. 111. Different African-American communities had different goals for themselves and therefore concentrated their efforts in those directions that would best improve their conditions. Norfolk’s black community could be less concerned about land because it was located in a port city where jobs centered around trade and domestic work. African-Americans in Georgia who were involved in rice cultivation were naturally more interested in acquiring land. See Russell Duncan, Freedom’s Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedmen (Athens, Ga., 1986), p. 7.
9 Harding, There Is a River, p. 296; Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long, pp. 534–35.
Although the officially reported results of the election did not include these black ballots, the significance of this political action went far beyond mere symbolism. First, it provided Norfolk’s black men, and to a lesser degree black women, an opportunity to dispute white male control of the political process even if only by being able to contest the election. Members of the Norfolk African-American community forcefully pronounced to the world that they—and not “traitors”—would define the meaning of their liberation. Norfolk became, in the words of Vincent Harding, the birthplace “of the freedom ballot among blacks” in postwar America. Second, and perhaps more significantly, their actions had an influence beyond the city’s boundaries. Other African-American communities followed the lead of these Norfolk blacks and eventually forced a repeal of the Virginia codes that denied political rights to African-Americans in the state.\(^{10}\)

Black Norfolksians did not become complacent toward their achievements. On 5 June 1865, three months after creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau, they met at the Catherine Street Baptist Church and composed a statement entitled *Equal Suffrage*, which demanded that the government “concede to us the full enjoyment of those privileges of full citizenship.” Blacks envisioned a three-part program that included obtaining the vote, ensuring fair labor practices, and accumulating property.\(^{11}\)

Many of those who signed this document were among the black political leadership in Norfolk for years to come. The interests of their gender and economic status led these men to focus much of their attention on universal male suffrage. Despite this concentration, they were also aware that political victories could become less meaningful if economic and social justice was circumscribed. They recognized that suffrage provided an easy target for traditional methods of political activity. The government had been instrumental in altering the status of black Americans, and surely, therefore, control of the government rested on the ability to secure positions for those who reflected the black community’s interests. This control could be achieved only if black men could vote as did white men. Norfolk’s black male leadership saw their inclusion in the body politic as a universal solution for all African-American concerns.

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\(^{10}\) Harding, *There Is a River*, p. 296.

One member of this outspoken group and a prominent voice in Norfolk African-American politics was Dr. Thomas Bayne, who was also influential in the leadership of the Colored Monitor Union Club. During his years as a slave, using the name Sam Nixon, Bayne learned dentistry and took advantage of the mobility open to skilled urban bondsmen. Indeed, Bayne's master sent him out on house calls throughout Norfolk. This latitude was not the same as freedom, however, and Bayne expressed his dissatisfaction with his status by "making use of his feet," a tried-and-true response to slavery. Before the war he escaped to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and continued to practice dentistry, obtaining additional training there. Upon his return to Norfolk after the war, Bayne quickly established himself in his profession, in acquiring property, and as a leading political figure in the city. Because his energy and political concerns struck a responsive chord in the hearts of the black community, Bayne represented their interests at the 1867 state constitutional convention.12

Joseph T. Wilson was another leading political activist in the Norfolk African-American community and a signer of Equal Suffrage. He had fled to the North during the 1850s and lived, like Bayne, in New Bedford. In 1862 he enlisted in the 2d Regiment, Louisiana Native Guards, was disabled in battle, and then was discharged. At the end of the war Wilson applied to the Norfolk Freedmen's Bureau for employment and was hired as a salesman at the city's Freedmen's Store in March 1865. Later, he published The True Southerner, which had been founded in Hampton in 1865 under a white editor, D. B. White, but moved to Norfolk in February 1866. During its brief existence, the paper became the leading voice for the Norfolk African-American community. This role probably accounts for its demise in 1866 at the hands of an angry white mob that smashed the presses and chased Wilson out of town briefly. Wilson moved about the state, residing in Petersburg, Richmond, and Norfolk, and remained active in politics. He held the position of inspector of customs in Norfolk and in 1884 established another short-lived newspaper in the city, The Right Way.13

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13 Applications for Employment, March-June 1865, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. See also Works Projects Administration, The Negro in Virginia (New York, 1940), p. 284; Tommy Bogger, "History of Norfolk's Blacks is a Story of Determination," Norfolk Virginian-Pilot and The Ledger-Star, 25 Apr. 1982; George Holbert Tucker, Norfolk Highlights, 1584-1881 (Portsmouth, 1972), pp. 121-22; U.S. Census Bureau, Ninth Census, 1870, Manuscript Population Schedules, Norfolk County; and the short biography...
A third signer of *Equal Suffrage* was George W. Cook, who came to Norfolk as a missionary for the American Missionary Association. Cook supervised two schools while his wife opened a third. Overworked and possessing few resources, he was unable to provide completely for those under his charge. Nevertheless, he enjoyed the trust of many African-Americans who recognized the value of his efforts on their behalf. Cook actively pursued positions from government bureaucrats, though usually without success. Originally a barber by trade, Cook was wounded in July 1862 by "friendly fire" and became unable to continue his vocation. He sought employment as a mail carrier in 1864, but the government did not grant his application. After meeting General Nelson A. Miles in Alexandria in August 1865 at the Colored State Convention, to which Cook was a delegate, he asked Miles for an appointment as "agent for the 'Freedmen' of the city of Norfolk for issuing rations to them." Cook's various requests were often accompanied by numerous letters of recommendation. For example, black citizens sent a petition—again without success—to O. O. Howard, head of the Freedmen's Bureau, to have Cook appointed "one of the Judges of the Court of Reconciliation."  

Then, as now, the voices of Norfolk's black clergy forcefully articulated the desires of the African-American community. Three clergymen signed *Equal Suffrage*. Two of them were local ministers, John M. Brown of the Bute Street African Methodist Episcopal Church and Thomas Henson of the Catherine Street Baptist Church. The third was a familiar political figure from Washington, D.C., Henry Highland Garnet, who became an honorary member of the committee established to present *Equal Suffrage*. The black churches in Norfolk, especially the Catherine Street Baptist Church, became the centers for mass meetings to discuss African-American issues during this period.  

Norfolk's black leaders also communicated with their counterparts elsewhere in the state and met to discuss their common and divergent views. In August 1865 Norfolk sent five black delegates to the Colored State Convention—Edward W. Williams, William Keeling, George W. Cook, John M. Brown, and Nicholas Barber. In addition to these official representatives, other Norfolk African-American voices at the convention included the Reverend William Davis, who opened the meeting with prayer, and William H. Kelly, who served on the Committee on

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14 For the various letters of recommendation for Cook and his requests, see Letters and Orders Received, 1865-67, especially the letters dated 3 Mar. 1864, 24 Sept. 1864, and 14 Aug. 1865, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands.

15 *Equal Suffrage*, p. 8.
Credentials. The purpose of this meeting of black Virginians was, as Cook noted, to discuss “this subject of freedom.” Cook was determined to exert himself “to secure the right of franchise in every way that is honorable and just.” This theme resounded throughout the convention and eventually encompassed the full range of rights of citizenship that the delegates framed in “An Address.”

Norfolk’s African-Americans scrutinized all areas of political life that affected their community. Suffrage was important, but maintaining those agencies that safeguarded other rights blacks had obtained was of equal concern. In that effort, the work of Union League member Joseph T. Wilson was crucial. As editor of The True Southerner, Wilson provided a means for the league to address the African-American community after the newspaper moved from Hampton to Norfolk in February 1866. That March Wilson expressed concern over state legislation that would permit black testimony in civil courts. This measure, he believed, jeopardized the Freedmen’s Bureau courts, which he considered important guardians of black rights. Civil courts, Wilson felt, were controlled by local whites who were not inclined to adjudicate matters equitably. Maintaining the bureau courts therefore became a priority. The message coming from the African-American community was clear—the nature and meaning of freedom should be determined by Norfolk’s blacks themselves. Their participation in the political process extended beyond the act of voting; it encompassed every aspect of their lives.

Because black Norfolkians were determined to control their own lives, racial tensions often ran high in the city. Despite safeguards and the presence of federal troops, confrontation could not be prevented. Indeed, Norfolk was the scene of the first major postwar southern race riot. This disturbance happened in April 1866 during a parade celebrating passage of the Civil Rights Act, prelude to the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. As the marchers made their way to a field where they planned to hear speeches, they encountered angry whites who jeered and threw bricks. Tensions mounted. Trouble erupted when an intoxicated off-duty white police officer, William Moseley, responded to the discharge of a blank volley at the parade grounds by attempting to arrest the wrong person. Moseley eluded his irate pursuers and sought refuge at a neighboring house. The occupant, Confederate veteran Robert Whitehurst, emerged from the building

17 Norfolk True Southerner, 22 Mar. 1866.
brandishing a gun and fired at the blacks, apparently wounding one of them. In the melee that followed, Whitehurst was fatally shot.\footnote{For varying assessments of the blame, see John Hammond Moore, “‘The Norfolk Riot, 16 April 1866,‘” VMHB 90 (1982): 155–64; Wertenbaker, Norfolk, pp. 234–35. The account in Wertenbaker is unconvincing. Although he does not expressly state that the northern soldiers were culpable, his preceding narrative certainly implies it. Moore’s account is corroborated by a version in the Norfolk True Southerner, 19 Apr. 1866. Another account that places responsibility for the riot on local white residents may be found in Robert W. Coakley, The Role of Federal Military Forces in Domestic Disorders, 1789–1878 (Washington, D.C., 1988), pp. 273–74.}

Although federal troops arrived to restore order, Norfolk’s African-American community endured a terrifying night of white reprisal. Armed groups of enraged whites roamed the streets indiscriminately killing and wounding black residents. Testimonies given before the subsequent board of inquiry suggested that “Norfolk, a city under federal rule for nearly four years, was still rebellious and defiant.” According to black resident Edward W. Williams, “it is a very awkward time in this city, and we have to be very careful how we walk, and I never go out at night.”\footnote{Moore, “Norfolk Riot,” pp. 155–64. See also Wertenbaker, Norfolk, pp. 234–35; Norfolk True Southerner, 12 Apr. 1866.}

Similar disturbances throughout the South, coupled with the enactment of repressive Black Codes in many of the former Confederate states, convinced Congress that presidential Reconstruction was inadequate because it tolerated continued southern defiance. Congress therefore passed the Reconstruction Act of 1867 that, along with the Civil Rights Act, ushered in a new phase of Reconstruction policy. Virginia became Military District Number One, radical Republicans gained control of the state legislature, former Confederates were disfranchised, and black men became eligible to vote. The major political goal of black Norfolksians had become a reality. A statewide registration of voters yielded 120,101 whites and 105,832 blacks who met eligibility qualifications. Despite the apparent numerical advantage for white voters, black demographic patterns gave African-Americans the edge in many counties. Such was the case in Norfolk, where black voters outnumbered whites 2,049 to 1,910.\footnote{Richard L. Morton, The Negro in Virginia Politics, 1865–1902 (Charlottesville, 1919), pp. 30–31. See also Wertenbaker, Norfolk, p. 235; Records of Persons Registering and Voting in Virginia, ca. 1867–69, Records of U.S. Army, Continental Commands, 1821–1920, RG 393, DNA.}
election day the league sent carriages throughout the city to transport voters to the polls. Not surprisingly, black Norfolksians voted for the two radical candidates, and whites voted for the two conservative nominees. The formidable African-American numerical advantage elected Thomas Bayne and Henry M. Bowden (a white candidate) as the two representatives to the state convention. Bowden received the most votes; sixty-two whites and 1,815 blacks cast their ballots for him. Bayne received the second highest total with nine white votes and 1,768 black votes, thus indicating that some in the Norfolk African-American community did not view him with the same enthusiasm as they did Bowden. Nevertheless, Bayne emerged as a leader among the black delegates at the convention.21

The proceedings of the convention provide an important glimpse into early postwar black political debate. “It is a noted fact,” stated Bayne in addressing the convention, “that in this country, we have had two distinct classes of people, the blacks and the whites, the slave and the free people.” Indeed, he argued, before black emancipation whites too were “indirect” slaves because they were “tied hand and foot to the dead body of slavery.” Thus, the Great Emancipator liberated all men, not just African-Americans. Still, according to Bayne, “the spirit of oppression yet remains in the people. We cannot make a man in a day.”22

Bayne’s typology primarily considered the political relationships of black and white men, not women. According to this black spokesman, women had the “right to raise and bear children, and to train them for their future duties in life.” He did admit in a debate, however, that the words “man” or “mankind” used in the preamble of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights referred to “both a man and his wife and his children.” Further, “All men’ includes both male and female. It takes in all mankind.” Even though Bayne’s myopic view of the formal political arena generally excluded women, he nevertheless envisioned a broader meaning of political rights than just voting and holding office by males. Bayne proposed “to insert” those “political rights of men” (with “men” in its broadest sense) in other places. Specifically, he had “a special eye to securing for us our rights in the cars and steamboats and

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other similar places.' He acknowledged that current strategy demanded concerted effort to obtain obvious political rights, but political rights, as outlined in *Equal Suffrage*, included much more than the vote.²³

Even though Bayne considered it his role to extend or limit the level of participation by black women, African-American women following "liberation" were making crucial decisions about their lives and the nature of their relationships apart from what their male counterparts deemed appropriate. The decisions that these black women rendered, as Paula Giddings has noted, "revealed a profound understanding of the relationship between their personal and political strivings."²⁴ Clearly, the black women of Norfolk by their attendance at and participation in political gatherings concerning suffrage and other issues voiced their own determination to be a part of any newly structured social and political order. Though legally restricted from formally taking part in the political world, they could use the same traditional strategies as black men. More often, however, they employed nontraditional methods to express their discontent in the early years following the Civil War.

Despite Bayne's limited view of the role of black women in the formal political process, he nevertheless understood that changes in structural relationships, once set in motion, often proceeded independently. Likewise, he felt such changes could be painful. "While doing away with the old and preparing for the new order of things," he declared, "some of us must suffer." Bayne, however, was no martyr. In order to protect loyal black and white citizens, he supported a resolution to continue the Freedmen's Bureau's presence in Virginia, despite some concerns over its effectiveness. Bayne did not suggest, however, that blacks rely solely on an outside agency for protection. Instead, he reminded those who continued to experience oppression that

if a man comes to you and kicks you in the morning and you say nothing, he will certainly kick you at dinner time, and if you say nothing then, he will feel it his religious duty to kick you before you say your prayers; but if you break his leg in the morning when he kicks you, he will take a special care that the other leg is not punished in the afternoon.

Other members of the convention viewed such appeals with contempt, finding them both a waste of time and irrelevant to topics being discussed.²⁵


Bayne did not always engage in hyperbolic abstractions during the convention. He and black convention delegate Willis Augustus Hodges from neighboring Princess Anne County raised important questions as the convention sought to construct a new social order. Bayne wanted, for example, to relieve disfranchised citizens of the burden of taxation. In an attempt to apply pressure on the convention to widen voting privileges for all loyal Virginians, Bayne proposed “that all persons taxed” in the state “who are not enfranchised . . . be exempt from all taxation until” they “are enfranchised by the laws of the State.” In addition, Bayne wanted all moneys previously collected from such persons returned.26

Education was of particular interest to Bayne. He sought to incorporate into the new state constitution a clause that would require the integration of all publicly supported schools. He tried to amend a resolution supporting public education for “all classes” to include the phrase “without distinction of color.” Although his amendment was ruled out of order because the resolution had already been referred to the Committee on Education, Bayne nevertheless maintained his interest in the subject. Seizing the moment on 7 April 1868, he introduced a proposal that schools receiving public support be integrated. In part this resolution stated, “The free public schools in this State shall be open free to all classes, and no child, pupil or scholar shall be ejected from said schools on account of race, color, or any invidious distinction.” By a vote of 67 to 21, however, the convention defeated the proposal the following day. Local jurisdictions were left to decide the controversial issue of integrated public education.27

Although the attempt to establish integrated public schools failed—a proposition that may not have been too important to the African-American community in Norfolk at the time, despite Bayne’s desires—the battle over black male suffrage concluded favorably. Some members of the convention initially discussed whether the ballot would be harmful for blacks, a proposition Bayne ridiculed. In the end, the convention submitted a constitution that enfranchised black men and disfranchised many whites who were former Confederates. To vote on the entire constitution as presented would have meant that former Confederates would be permanently denied the right to vote, an unpalatable outcome

Although Conservative candidate Gilbert C. Walker won the gubernatorial election in July 1869, he failed to carry Norfolk by the slender margin of eighty votes.

for the majority of white Virginians. They urged, therefore, a separate vote on this portion of the proposed constitution, which President Ulysses S. Grant so ordered. On 6 July 1869 a majority of Virginia’s voters accepted the new constitution (referred to as the “expurgated constitution” because it lacked the objectionable clause) and narrowly rejected the separate clause disfranchising former Confederates. In addition, Virginia voters elected a conservative state government headed by Gilbert C. Walker, who defeated H. H. Wells, the radical Republican candidate, and his black running mate, J. D. Harris of Hampton.28

Norfolk’s voting population endorsed the new state constitution. Much to the dismay of some local papers, a sizable white opposition to the document did not materialize. Instead, Norfolk’s voters overwhelmingly accepted the new constitution with 3,317 affirmative votes and only 128 negative ones. When voting on the separate clause to disfranchise former Confederates, white opposition emerged, although the small

majority of votes enjoyed by African-American residents manifested itself with 2,013 votes for the clause and 1,982 opposed. Similarly, Norfolk voters narrowly favored the losing candidate in the gubernatorial race—2,094 to 2,014.29

Despite disappointment in the governor's race, Norfolk's black voters expected to determine the outcome of local elections for federal and state representatives. This expectation, however, was not realized. Norfolk became the scene of numerous political gatherings as opposing forces attempted to sway voters to their positions. Even in the gubernatorial race a political split in the black community developed. The *Norfolk Journal* enthusiastically reported the efforts of the Colored Walker Club—a group of conservative blacks who supported Gilbert C. Walker's bid for governor. The paper considered these black voices "an intelligent and excellent class of our colored citizens" whose "efforts should meet with every encouragement from" those "who take an interest in the elevation of the colored race." The newspaper hoped to increase the volume of these voices and minimize others as it matter-of-factly reported on and played down the gatherings of black and white radicals in the city.30

Before the election, many black and white radicals expressed concern that white employers, in an attempt to manipulate votes, were applying economic pressures on their black employees, even threatening African-American workers with the loss of their jobs. In response to this threat, radicals issued a circular asking black workers to report any coercive incident so that radicals might provide them protection. The *Norfolk Journal* questioned the legitimacy of the concern. The paper asked why radicals needed to offer additional protection because the military still maintained a presence in the city. The *Journal* supported its argument with an affidavit from three black workers who stated that "their present employer, has never requested them to support any candidate" while "in his employ." The fear expressed by radicals was not new, however, and had occupied a part of the constitutional debates in Richmond. Whether the concern was legitimate was probably inconsequential, because Norfolk's African-Americans had already demonstrated their determination to vote before legally allowed, without regard for the possible social or economic consequences to them personally.31

Indeed, the day of the election brought enthusiastic participation from both black and white voters. By midday, one paper reported,

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30 *Norfolk Journal*, 30 June 1869.
31 Ibid.
Norfolk African-Americans were unsuccessful in their bid to elect a black representative to the newly reconstituted state legislature in 1869, although twenty-seven African-Americans did take seats from other areas. Shown here are several members of the 1887-88 General Assembly (front row: Alfred W. Harris of Dinwiddie County, William W. Evans of Petersburg, and Caesar Perkins of Buckingham; back row: John H. Robinson of Elizabeth City County, Goodman Brown of Surry, Nathaniel M. Griggs of Prince Edward, William H. Ash of Nottoway, and Briton Baskerville, Jr., of Mecklenburg).

"whites were 220 ahead in the city." By dinner time, however, black voters came out "in solid column and voted heavy." Despite the black showing, the city's conservative newspapers were optimistic that the outcome would still favor the causes they supported. One paper suggested that the Colored Walker Club had laid a hopeful foundation and had done "good service in the cause of equal rights and the expurgated Constitution." The editors predicted that "the white Radical vote will not exceed 75, while the colored Conservative vote will reach at least 100." Despite such hopeful pronouncements, only forty-seven African-Americans voted for the Conservative cause, while sixty-five whites voted for the radical position. As one paper was forced to recognize, "the negro vote on the conservative [ballot] was too inconsiderable to have any weight."32

32 Ibid., 7 July 1869; see also the Norfolk Virginian, 9 July 1869.
Racial issues separated conservative and radical positions, but the radicals were divided among themselves as the effort at coalition politics foundered. The majority of African-American voters in the city supported Bayne's attempt to gain the Second District seat in the United States House of Representatives. Other radicals, some blacks but primarily whites, supported Lucius H. Chandler for the nomination. Chandler, an 1850 northern transplant from Maine, resided in Norfolk and had remained a Unionist during the Civil War. Still other radicals of both races endorsed yet another transplanted candidate, James H. Platt, who lived in Suffolk and enjoyed African-American support there but not in the city of Norfolk. The split was exacerbated by intersectional conflicts within the Second District. In the end, the race became a two-man contest between Bayne and Platt for the radical vote. With such a division among radicals, the Conservative candidate won the seat Bayne so desperately wanted.

African-Americans from Norfolk were no more successful in providing representatives to the newly reconstituted state legislature. The new General Assembly contained twenty-seven black members, but none of these representatives was from the city proper, despite the efforts of African-Americans. The *Norfolk Journal* reported on 2 July 1869, for example, that black Republicans had nominated James F. Newton for the House of Delegates and supported Willis Augustus Hodges for the state Senate. Before election day, however, another black candidate, James Outten, had been added to the roster for the House of Delegates. Despite a relatively good turnout at the polls, Outten placed fourth in the balloting. Newton was a distant fifth, and Hodges was nearly 1,800 votes behind the second-place finisher for the Senate. Despite the poor showing by black candidates in the Norfolk balloting, the radicals enjoyed some success in the city returns. In general, however, Conservatives carried the state, and local white conservatives joined in the celebration despite the results of the city balloting in statewide elections. When Congress accepted the election results in 1869, Reconstruction in Virginia was nearly complete. All that remained, as far as Norfolk was concerned, was the selection of a city government. This process was completed by 1870.

As a result of the newly approved state constitution, many whites who had been unable to vote were added to the rolls. This change

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The Virginia Magazine

eliminated the small black majority that had formerly existed in Norfolk. Many Conservatives enjoined white voters to take advantage of this numerical superiority by avoiding the splits that had earlier encumbered the radicals. By so doing, they reasoned, they could assure a Conservative victory. The taproot of political control would be racial solidarity. The local papers sounded cries for racial unity and warned that the results of a black victory would be "subordination of property, the intelligence, and the industry of the city to pauperism, ignorance, and sloth." Furthermore, "Christian civilization" would be degraded should blacks gain the upper hand, and "Anglo-Saxon enterprise" would be crushed "beneath the heels of Fetish Superstition and African un thrift."  

Black and white radicals also went into action and held mass meetings in order to organize their efforts. One such gathering, held on 22 April 1870, centered on the topic of voter registration. The radicals believed they could overturn their numerical disadvantage by enrolling more voters. They therefore established committees of both blacks and whites charged with the responsibility of increasing the number of registered voters. Such familiar African-American leaders as George Cook served on these committees; they did not want to see their efforts minimized because of a lack of participation.  

The local papers knew they were in for a battle. The Norfolk Virginian's list of potential candidates for the upcoming city election included seven blacks for some of the less important city positions. Thomas Bayne, for example, announced his intention to seek the office of physician to the almshouse, while Joseph T. Wilson ran for gauger and inspector. In similar fashion Thomas Paige was a candidate for the post of weigher of hay, while James Newton sought to be the keeper of the magazine. Though these positions were hardly the most prestigious ones, the appearance of so many African-American candidates on the ballot was a cause of concern for the newspaper.  

As in previous political contests, a unified front eluded black Norfolksians. A debate between Bayne and Wilson, from which Wilson emerged victorious, signaled an apparent change in the mantle of African-American leadership. The Norfolk Virginian reported that the rift occurred at the radical nominating convention. For the paper this outcome was a welcomed change: "the champion must resign the belt to his successful competitor, Jos. T. Wilson, who now leads the negroes."

35 Norfolk Journal, 20 May 1870. In an earlier editorial the Norfolk Journal suggested that a "black cloud of radical rule threatens to darken the political horizon, unless the Conservative party select men who can and will concentrate the whole vote" (ibid., 6 May 1870).
36 Ibid., 22 Apr. 1870.
37 Norfolk Virginian, 10 May 1870.
Unfortunately, because the convention held closed sessions, the details of the debate and the nature of the differences between the two have not survived to provide further insight into the workings of black politics in Norfolk. Equally important, the paper failed to recognize that African-Americans did not speak with one voice but could and did differ on many issues. Goals often paralleled and even mirrored one another, but specific strategies often varied.38

After the debate another meeting of radicals gathered to nominate candidates, including a number of African-Americans, for the city council. This time, instead of seeking minor political offices, blacks strove to become an integral part of the city’s decision-making body. Although radicals chose nominees for all wards and established committees to register voters throughout the city, their success was limited to the Second Ward, where black numerical strength was greatest. Joseph T. Wilson and Thomas Paige were among the four African-Americans elected to the new city council. Generally, however, Conservative candidates enjoyed more success throughout the city. When John B. Whitehead assumed the mayor’s office on 1 July 1870, Reconstruction ended. As the *Norfolk Journal* noted, “the Radicals elect nine Councilmen out of thirty-seven. The Conservatives carry three wards and the Radicals one—glory enough for one day.”39

Once a conservative government was reinstated in Norfolk in 1870, the city council began to establish the bounds of political and social relations between Norfolk residents. African-American councilmen, although a minority voice, were at least present. Meeting in 1871, the council set out to redraw the ward boundaries and reapportion the number of councilmen from each ward. The smallest number of councilmen came from a newly constituted Fourth Ward (where black Norfolians were concentrated), which could elect five councilmen out of a total of twenty-eight. Previously, the old Fourth Ward had sent eleven representatives to the council. Candidates for council seats were nominated by political parties in each ward and then elected by ward. If a black candidate received sufficient support for his candidacy within the new Fourth Ward, he would more than likely win a seat on the council. This structure permitted at least a limited black representation on city council: white Conservatives conceded five seats to Republicans in the black stronghold of the Fourth Ward. Following any election, the new council—referred to as the common council—chose from among its

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38 Ibid., 23 May 1870.
39 Ibid., 24 May 1870; see also *Norfolk Journal*, 22 Apr. 1870; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*, p. 245.
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ranks the members of the select council, which constituted an upper house.40

In the 1872 election for council representation, three blacks from the Fourth Ward won office—A. A. Portlock, John D. Epps, and Jacob Riddick. None was chosen to sit on the select council. Their effectiveness on the common council was probably minimal: they were individual minority voices in a solid conservative chorus. Indeed, before the end of their terms, the trio became a duet when John Epps submitted, and the council accepted, his resignation. Why he chose to resign is unclear, and his action had little effect on the affairs of the council. When issues of minor importance to conservatives arose—as when Riddick offered a resolution “to put into proper condition the pump on the southeast corner of Hawk and Liberty streets”—no opposition appeared. When, however, Riddick as a member of the Committee on Schools urged the council to appoint a special panel to study “the location and condition of the colored public schools,” the resolution was simply referred back to committee.41

40 See The Revised Ordinances of the City of Norfolk to Which are Prefixed the Original Charter of the Borough, and the Amended Charter of 1845 Creating the Borough into a City, and a Collection of Acts and Parts of Acts of the General Assembly, Relating to the City (Norfolk, 1866), pp. 159–60; The Ordinances of the City of Norfolk to Which is Appended the Charter of the City (Norfolk, 1875), p. 156.

41 For the various motions made by Riddick, see the Norfolk Journal, 8 Jan. 1873. For the resignation of Epps, see ibid., 8 Mar. 1873. Although no details were given concerning this
Many Voices, Similar Concerns

Riddick, by trade a barber with primarily a white clientele (his business was in the de facto segregated Atlantic Hotel), nevertheless remained a steadfast supporter of black education throughout the 1870s. A meeting of black residents in 1873 voiced concern over lack of educational facilities. William Stevens, a black representative to the state legislature from Sussex County, expressed his disappointment over the absence of black representation on the Board of School Trustees. Throughout the 1870s, the council continued its cavalier posture toward black educational demands, though in 1883 Riddick finally won appointment to the Board of School Trustees. This long-overdue appointment reflected the intense interest of Norfolk’s African-American community in equal educational opportunities.42

Blacks used traditional methods of protest touching many areas of their lives. Although they had community representation on the council throughout this period, the power these African-American councilmen wielded was limited. For example, a disturbing pattern of increased black arrests throughout the 1870s and governmental responses to those arrested brought swift condemnation from the African-American community.43 In 1873 concern over the city’s chain gang and the use of the whipping post prompted black residents to gather at the Bute Street Baptist Church to determine ways to eliminate these practices. At this familiar scene of black political protest, Norfolk’s African-Americans hoped that their objections would translate into legislative reform. Although the whipping post’s demise had to wait another decade, these African-Americans still drafted resolutions condemning its use. In part the resolutions read:

That the chain-gang is an organization for the degradation of the negro—an institution unknown to us in the days of slavery—too intolerable for freemen, and should by a wise Legislature be abolished.

That the whipping post is a characteristic feature of uncivilization, established in the primal age of ignorance, and . . . ought to be denounced by every American as iniquitous and barbaric in its origin and character.

resignation, the paper mentioned on several occasions the difficulty the council had achieving a quorum. Perhaps Epps simply found it difficult to meet with council and decided to resign.


43 For an analysis of the growing number of blacks arrested in the 1870s, see the police chief’s reports in Message of John S. Tucker, Mayor of the City of Norfolk, Virginia, to the Select and Common Councils Together With Municipal Reports for the Year Ending December 31st, 1876 (Norfolk, 1877), and the reports for 1878 and 1879. In the Message Ending June 30th, 1878, the police chief reported that there had been 1,832 arrests the previous year “of which number 1,022 were whites, and 810 blacks” (p. 82). In his next report, contained in Message Ending June 30th, 1879, he informed the councils that the total number of arrests had increased to “2,244 of which number 1,092 were whites and 1,152 colored” (p. 92).
Richard G. L. Paige, a member of the House of Delegates from Norfolk County, attended a meeting in 1873 condemning Norfolk’s use of chain gangs and the whipping post.

Black community leaders and elected officials advocated these resolutions in speeches before a throng of African-Americans. The local papers reported the proceedings and noted the presence of Joseph T. Wilson, George W. Cook, R. G. L. Paige (state legislator from Norfolk County), William Keeling, and William Stevens (a Sussex County state legislator). The *Journal* felt Stevens gave the best speech because his words appeared conciliatory. The paper decried the attempts of the fallen black leader, “‘the redoubtable Doctor’ Thomas Bayne, to speak and was disturbed by the ‘vindictive’ speech delivered by Wilson.”

Although black elected officials in Norfolk could not control policies in the councils, they could assume leadership in effecting some changes in the lives of those in the black community. For example, African-Americans had no city burial ground. Some blacks had been buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery and Potter’s Field (later renamed West Point Cemetery), but more often their remains found their way to privately owned burial grounds, especially in Berkeley, just outside the city. Some African-American veterans were buried in the national cemetery located in Hampton.

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45 Black councilman James E. Fuller was responsible for changing the name from Potter’s Field to West Point Cemetery in 1883. See the *Norfolk Virginian*, 6, 9 June 1883. In addition to
In 1883 councilman James E. Fuller introduced a resolution to change the name of Potter's Field to West Point Cemetery.

In May 1873 the select council resolved that a "portion of the city property lying on the north side of Elmwood cemetery" be used as a burial ground for African-Americans and be called Calvary. The councils adopted this resolution and later appointed black resident William Harris to be keeper of the cemetery. Although the resolution passed, the council or, more likely, the black community later found the site unacceptable, and the African-American burial ground was not located there. Black residents probably were not inclined to have space designated for African-American remains so near Potter's Field.  

Two years later, the select council directed the Committee on Cemeteries to "advertise for a suitable lot of land for a colored cemetery, and report as speedily as possible to the Councils." In phrasing their plan in this fashion, the select council hinted that the previous location had proved unsuitable. On 1 June 1876 T. R. and Mary F. Ballentine sold a

Fuller's activities, other black leaders and organizations attempted to provide burial plots for African-Americans. James Outten, for example, who was a founder of the Sons and Daughters of Joshua, was buried in a lot in Berkeley owned by the society. See Outten's obituary in the Norfolk Virginian, 29 May 1883. In May 1873 Joseph T. Wilson, who was commander of Cailloux Post No. 7 of the Grand Army of the Republic, along with other black posts went to the Hampton cemetery to decorate the graves of black Federal soldiers (Norfolk Journal, 24 May 1873).

46 For this resolution, see the comments on the "New Colored Cemetery" in the Norfolk Journal, 10 May 1873. For Harris's appointment, see ibid., 7 June 1873.
plot they owned to the city for the specified purpose. In January 1877 the city councils passed an ordinance designating this newly purchased property “as the burial ground of the colored citizens of the city.” Once again the councils named this cemetery Calvary. Although death is the great equalizer, black remains were separated from those of whites in this public cemetery reserved exclusively for African-Americans.47

By the midpoint of the 1870s, Norfolk’s black community had experienced a decade of political participation. Traditional political activity preoccupied many black residents. In numerous meetings and petitions, touching every aspect of their lives, they saw an avenue to improve their collective condition. Much of that initial activity was directed toward securing suffrage, but black men quickly obtained that right soon after the war. In response, conservative white politicians in various locales attempted to circumvent black voting strength by gerrymandering their cities. This strategy proved successful in Norfolk, where black candidates could hope to win elective office only from the Fourth Ward. Despite this limitation, the Norfolk African-American community did not appear dissatisfied with the ward system. At the very least, black males were voting and being elected to public office all within the span of five years after the war. Attention could therefore be directed toward a host of other issues facing black Norfolkians as the city adjusted to a new social order dictated by emancipation and reconstruction. Many of these concerns lent themselves to the formal political process of petitions, resolutions, and support for elected black officials. Despite the limited power wielded by these African-American politicians, there were clear signs the Norfolk black community was intent on a collective effort to enhance the control of its members over their own lives as free citizens of Virginia.

47 Norfolk Landmark, 14 Apr. 1875; Ordinances of the City of Norfolk Passed Subsequent to the Revised Edition of 1875, and Prior to July 1st, 1877, together with Laws of the State, Concerning the City Not Embraced in Said Edition (Norfolk, 1877), p. 20.