

BRANCH, Tazewell (13 May 1828–30 April 1925), member of the House of Delegates, was born in Prince Edward County, the son of Richard Branch and Mary Hays. Until emancipation he was owned by the Thackston family, for whom he worked as a house servant and shoemaker. Branch learned to read and write, and many of his contemporaries characterized him as unusually intelligent. About 1859 he married Harriet Lacy, also a slave. They had four sons and six daughters.

With both literacy and a trade, Branch quickly took advantage of his freedom. He was one of the trustees who purchased land in 1868 and 1869 for what became Beulah African Methodist Episcopal Church. By 1873 he owned property of his own in Farmville and served on the town council. Like other Piedmont counties with large African American populations, Prince Edward maintained an active Radical Republican Party organization, and Branch received the party's nomination for the House of Delegates in 1873. As a county native respected by whites as well as blacks, Branch differed from Edgar Allan, the British-born Union army veteran and Republican candidate for both the state senate and commonwealth's attorney. Thus, more than a play on words may have been behind Allan's description of him as one of the party's "olive branches." The Republicans carried the county, and Branch easily defeated his opponent, Joseph T. Lyon.

Two years later Branch and many other county Republicans cooperated with moderate Conservatives to form a ticket for local offices. The fusion ticket won, but the Republicans split over Branch's candidacy for reelection. Allan repeated a Conservative charge that Branch had a poor attendance record in the legislature, and Branch damned Allan as a party wrecker. As a result largely of defections from Allan's allies, Branch won reelection. During both of his terms in the

assembly he served on the Committee on Claims and voted with the small Republican minority.

Branch was said to have become too disgusted with politics to seek reelection in 1877, but he accepted a federal patronage position as an assistant assessor of internal revenue. Because he refused to follow other Republicans into a coalition with the Readjusters, he was dismissed from this position in October 1881. Branch remained out of politics thereafter, although in 1888 he supported the successful bid of John Mercer Langston to become Virginia's first African American congressman.

Making a living in Farmville proved difficult, as factory-produced shoes took customers away from Branch's shop. Although he unsuccessfully operated a grocery store for a time, Harriet Branch's income as a laundress became the family's most important source of income. Perhaps the couple's greatest achievement was to pass their ambition and love of learning to their children. All of them attended college or normal school, and four became teachers. Their son Clement Tazewell Branch received an M.D. from Howard University in 1900, settled in Camden, New Jersey, and in 1920 became the first African American to serve on that city's school board. Their daughter Mary Elizabeth Branch attended Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (later Virginia State University) and then taught there for about twenty years; its Branch Hall was subsequently named in her honor. In 1930 she became president of Tillotson College in Austin, Texas, a faltering institution that she transformed into a well-respected and fully accredited African American college.

Branch was a typical postwar African American politician in several respects: he had a close-knit nuclear family and possessed occupational skills, literacy, and property. Branch's independence and willingness to cooperate with moderate white Conservatives

limited his political influence but earned him a lasting local reputation for integrity. He lived in Farmville until after 1911, when he sold the last of his property and moved to New Jersey to live with his son. Tazewell Branch died in Camden on 30 April 1925 and was buried in Odd Fellows Cemetery in Farmville.

Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, 5, 67 (por.); birth and death dates from New Jersey death certificate; family history in Mary Jenness, *Twelve Negro Americans* (1936), 85–100;

Herbert Clarence Bradshaw, *History of Prince Edward County, Virginia* (1955), 426–435, 438, 451–452, 688, 695; Election Records, no. 2, RG 13, LVA; political career reported in *Farmville Mercury*, 1873–1875 (quotation in 6 Nov. 1873); *Richmond Whig*, 28 Oct. 1879; *Washington People's Advocate*, 8 Oct. 1881; information provided by Toni Gutwein of Camden County Historical Society and Patricia Whitney of public library at Moorestown, N.J.; eulogy in *Farmville Herald*, 15 May 1925.

Source: Morgan, Lynda J. "Branch, Tazewell." In *The Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2, edited by Sara B. Bearss et al., 195–196. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001.



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