

BREEDLOVE, William (ca. 1820–15 June 1871), member of the Convention of 1867–1868, was born in Essex County, the son of James Davis, a white man, and Polly Breedlove, a free African American. Little is known of Breedlove's early life. The 1850 census identifies him as a blacksmith and literate. With his wife, Susan Breedlove, the daughter of Cordelia Drake, he resided in the Tappahannock household of Henry Adams, next to the blacksmith shop of the elderly James Lewis, from whom Breedlove may have learned his trade. When Susan Breedlove died of typhoid fever in December 1857, they had at least two sons and one daughter, of whom only George W. Breedlove survived to adulthood. On 9 December 1858 Breedlove married Eliza Ann Davis, the daughter of a black man and a white woman and therefore also free. They had at least two sons and two daughters.

By 1860 Breedlove had accumulated real estate worth \$1,500 and personal property worth \$250. He may also have begun operating a ferry service across the Rappahannock River by then. Free people of color usually lived inconspicuously, but during the Civil War that became difficult. They faced the threat of being impressed to labor on Confederate fortifications and might also receive nearly irresistible appeals for help from slaves attempting to escape behind the lines of the United States Army. On 2 November 1863 Breedlove and another free black named William Chandler, his employee at the ferry, transported an African American man across the river under the impression that he had a pass authorizing him to travel, when in fact the man was attempting to escape from slavery. Breedlove and Chambers were arrested and on 16 November 1863 convicted in Essex County of assisting in

a slave's escape. The penalty prescribed by law was that both convicted men be "sold into absolute slavery."

The prosecuting attorney and some of the justices of the peace who convicted them recommended gubernatorial clemency, believing that Breedlove and Chandler had not known that the man was a slave. Other local dignitaries, including Lieutenant Governor Robert Latané Montague, also wrote in Breedlove's behalf and described him as an honest and industrious blacksmith, a man of good character, and a valuable member of the community. Governor John Letcher pardoned Breedlove on 19 December 1863, and Governor William "Extra Billy" Smith pardoned Chandler on 29 January 1864.

These legal travails may have sparked Breedlove's postwar political activism. On 1 October 1867 the local agent of the Freedmen's Bureau reported that blacks in Tappahannock were holding meetings to select a candidate for the state constitutional convention. They settled on William Breedlove, and their counterparts in neighboring Middlesex County, the other county in the electoral district, agreed. In the balloting on 22 October, Breedlove received votes from only three white men, but black voters outnumbered white voters in both counties, and he easily defeated the white candidate, William G. Jeffries. Brigadier General John McAllister Schofield, then the military commander of Virginia under Congressional Reconstruction, observed that Breedlove lacked formal education but was "honest and intelligent." During the constitutional convention Breedlove sat on the Committee on Taxation and Finance. He served inconspicuously and voted consistently with the Radical majority.

On 19 July 1869 the military commander in Essex County appointed Breedlove one of six new justices of the peace for the county. Breedlove also served on the town council of Tappahannock, and his appointment on 3 March 1870 as postmaster there outraged many local whites. He stepped down as postmaster on 13 March 1871, possibly because of failing health. William Breedlove died of "Brain Fever" near Tappahannock three months later, on 15 June 1871, survived by his wife and four children, the youngest less than a year old. Several of his children acquired property in Tappahannock, and George W. Breedlove served as a constable for a time, carrying on for another generation the respectable and constructive reputation that William Breedlove had fashioned before the war.

Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, 5, 62; age given as about twenty-three on 24 July 1843 in "Register of Free Blacks, 1810–1843, Essex County," *Tidewater Virginia Families* 9 (Nov./Dec. 2000): 191; age given respectively as thirty, forty, and

fifty in Census, Essex Co., 1850, 1860, 1870; BVS Marriage Register, Essex Co., records second marriage in 1858 at age thirty-eight with clerk's marginal note identifying Breedlove's parents and the races of his and his wife's parents; *Commonwealth v. Breedlove and Chandler* and accompanying documents, Pardon Papers, Dec. 1863, Executive Papers of Governor John Letcher, RG 3, LVA (first quotation); Watson R. Wentworth to O. Brown, 1 Oct. 1867, Freedmen's Bureau Records; Election Records, no. 427, RG 13, LVA; Lowe, "Virginia's Reconstruction Convention," 358 (second quotation); Hume, "Membership of Convention of 1867–1868," 481; James B. Slaughter, *Settlers, Southerners, Americans: The History of Essex County, Virginia, 1608–1984* (1985), 210–211; Essex Co. Circuit Court Order Book, 3:231; Records of Appointment of Postmasters, Virginia, Essex Co., Post Office Department, RG 28, NARA; *Richmond Dispatch*, 15 Mar. 1870; death dates of Breedlove and first wife in BVS Death Register, Essex Co. (third quotation).

Source: Kneebone, John T. "Breedlove, William." In *The Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2, edited by Sara B. Bearss et al., 212–213. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001.



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