

BROWN, John (ca. January 1830–after 19 June 1900), member of the Convention of 1867–1868, was born into slavery in Southampton County. The names of his parents are not known. His owner, Robert Ridley, was a large-scale planter who sat in the Convention of 1850–1851. Ridley died in 1852, and, possibly as a result of that event, Brown's wife, two daughters, and perhaps a brother were later sold and taken to Mississippi. He maintained sporadic contact with them until the Civil War.

Brown resided on Ridley family land until at least 1870. About 1861 he remarried, to a woman named Chloe with whom he had six children, including three sons and two daughters. In April 1867 Brown dictated a letter that the local agent of the Freedmen's Bureau wrote for him and addressed to Holly Springs, Mississippi, to his daughters from his first marriage. Evidently it did not reach them.

Although modern scholarship has largely discredited the old stereotype of illiterate former slaves elevated to high public office during Reconstruction, Brown showed by his example that some blacks did overcome all the handicaps of enslavement to gain postwar political prominence and that ambitious Virginia freedpeople briefly enjoyed enlarged opportunities. Brown won his convention seat at a remarkable moment in Virginia's political history. During the summer of 1867 newly energized freedmen sought to break free from the subservient position to which they had long been assigned. Armed for the first time with the ballot, blacks dared to assert themselves in ways that would have been unthinkable at any time in the past.

Brown and other politically active blacks in Southampton spurned an alliance with moderate white former Whigs who hoped to win black votes.

They boldly took matters into their own hands. In an astonishing display of group cohesion and discipline, almost 98 percent of registered black men appeared at the polls on 22 October 1867. All 1,242 black voters and a lone white supported Brown, who easily defeated two white candidates. Nothing since Nat Turner's Rebellion in 1831 so shocked the local gentry. Available evidence does not indicate how Brown emerged as the spokesman for Southampton's freedpeople, but in the short time after Emancipation he must have exhibited impressive leadership abilities to command a unanimous following.

Brown was appointed to the Committee on the Judiciary, excepting County and Corporation Courts. He did not assume a conspicuous role at the convention. In assessing the delegates John McAllister Schofield, the army general then in control of Virginia, dismissed Brown as a man with "no force of character." Brown regularly voted with the Radicals to reform and democratize the state constitution and protect the rights of freedpeople. Unfortunately for him and his fellow Radicals, their startling 1867 victory galvanized opposition. Both in Southampton County and statewide, former Whigs and Democrats mobilized to counter the black political initiative by building similar political unity among whites. The resulting Conservative Party gained control of the state in 1869. Voters approved the new constitution but struck out a clause that disqualified prominent former Confederates from office.

The 1870, 1880, and 1900 census takers listed Brown as unable to read or write. Described as a carpenter who owned no land in 1870, he paid taxes on one horse and several other animals. In 1880 and 1900 Brown was identified as a farmer. He may have been related to a

Brown family of African Americans from New Bern, North Carolina, some of whom moved to Norfolk after the Civil War and became active in the Republican Party. John Brown died on an unknown date after the census enumeration of his district on 19 June 1900. Neither he nor his wife was listed in the 1910 census.

Month and year of birth and year of second marriage in Census, Southampton Co., 1900; Jackson, *Negro Office-*

Holders, 7; John Brown to Manerva Ann Brown and Ann Eliza Brown, 24 Apr. 1867, Freedmen's Bureau Records; Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834–1869* (1992), 246–258, 396; *Clarksville Tobacco Plant*, 11 Oct. 1867; *Richmond Daily Whig*, 28, 30 Oct. 1867; Election Records, no. 427, RG 13, LVA; Lowe, "Virginia's Reconstruction Convention," 354 (quotation); Hume, "Membership of Convention of 1867–1868," 481.

Source: Crofts, Daniel W. "Brown, John." In *The Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2, edited by Sara B. Bearss et al., 305–306. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001.



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