

CANADA, David (fl. 1867–1869), member of the Convention of 1867–1868, was born a slave, probably in Halifax County. Almost nothing is known about his life before he was elected one of the county's two convention delegates. Brigadier General John McAllister Schofield, then the military commander of Virginia, wrote that Canada was a stonemason who had been "emancipated by the war." References to Canada and other people in the county who shared his surname appear variously as Canada, Cannady, and even Kennedy. At least two other men in the county, one white and one black, were named David Canada, but his relationship to them, if any, is unknown. He was married to Martha Canada, maiden name unknown, and they had at least one son, named U. S. Grant Canada. A physical description and a caricature of Canada that appeared in the hostile newspaper *Richmond Southern Opinion* suggest that when he served in the convention he was a relatively young man of imposing stature and dark skin.

Conditions in Halifax County after the Civil War resembled those in other rural southern counties. Former slaves sought landownership as the means to secure their freedom, and former masters sought to secure farm laborers at low cost. Freedmen's Bureau agents in the county described numerous disputes over labor contracts, payments, and work discipline. As a stonemason, Canada may have had more advantages in the new free labor market than an agricultural worker would have. Tax lists show that he owned a cow in 1867 and acquired a horse and a second cow the following year. These tax lists identify him as a resident of Republican Grove in the northwestern part of the county, but derisive newspaper references to Canada as the delegate from "Low-Cuss Level" suggest a possible connection with Locust Level, near

the midpoint of the county's western boundary with Pittsylvania County.

Under the Reconstruction Act of March 1867, elections were to take place in October of that year for delegates to a convention called to draft a new constitution for Virginia. African American men were permitted for the first time to vote in that election and run for seats in the convention. Three white candidates, identified variously as former Whigs and Conservatives, entered the race. Black men and a few white Radicals gathered at Halifax Court House in September to select candidates. One white man and four black men declared themselves candidates. Several men made speeches, but the meeting broke up without narrowing the field.

Canada was almost certainly one of the candidates and speakers that day. Information about the campaign in Halifax is scant, and no official report of the vote for delegates exists. Black voters were not intimidated in their new role. When the local agent of the Freedmen's Bureau endorsed the white conservative candidates, blacks responded by successfully petitioning for his removal. They also turned out in large numbers on election day, 22 October. More than 2,700 African Americans voted, while fewer than 1,000 whites cast ballots. According to partial returns reported in the newspapers, Canada was the only black candidate to receive votes in every precinct, an indication that he enjoyed countywide support and a good reputation. He probably received no more than a few votes from whites.

Canada was present when the convention assembled in Richmond on 3 December 1867. He was appointed to the Committee on the Basis of Representation and Apportionment but did not play a significant role in the convention's rancorous debates. Referring to him as a sphinx, the *Richmond Southern Opinion* observed that

Canada "never speaks, though his nod is Radical." On nearly every important issue he voted with the Radicals, although he voted with the majority in opposition to a requirement for racial integration of the public schools. On 17 January 1868 Canada offered a resolution to appoint a state geologist to help develop the mineral resources of the state and a resolution that Virginia should adopt North Carolina's more efficient and economical tax system. Three days later he introduced a resolution to appoint a state chemist and create an experimental farm to teach scientific agriculture. Because Canada probably could not write (he signed for his convention wages with his mark), someone else most likely prepared the innovative resolutions, all of which died in committee.

The convention adjourned on 17 April 1868, fully expecting that a referendum on the new constitution would soon follow. Even though on 24 April Schofield postponed the vote indefinitely, the campaign over ratification continued. Declaring that whites would never accept domination by blacks, Conservatives in Halifax County, where blacks made up a majority of the population, organized to defeat what they derided as "Dave Cannady's Konsterstewshun." Canada returned to Richmond at the beginning of May to pick up copies of "his Constertutions," as a white journalist wrote it, before speaking in favor of ratification at meetings in Halifax County.

Local law enforcement officers and the military commissioner grew fearful that the political conflict might spark violence. African American speakers at Halifax Court House were silenced on 27 July 1868, and the commonwealth's attorney lectured them and their audience on propriety and the use of courteous language. Canada may have heard the lecture from his cell in the local jail. The previous week, while he was

speaking at Meadsville, a disturbance between whites and blacks occurred. Afterward, Canada reported, a party of whites threatened his life, and he appealed to the military commissioner at Halifax Court House for protection. The commissioner found everything quiet in Meadsville, then ordered him to report to Halifax Court House, where on 25 July 1868 he placed Canada under arrest. He was permitted to post bail and leave jail about two weeks later. At the next county court, on 28 September, the grand jury found insufficient grounds to indict Canada.

A year passed before Congress authorized an election to ratify the constitution, which was scheduled for 6 July 1869, at which time the voters were also to elect a new governor and members of the assembly. During the campaign a moderate wing of the Republican Party split from the Radicals and organized as the True Republicans. Conservative Party strategists recognized the opportunity for an alliance, and the Conservative nominees of 1868 for statewide office retired in favor of the True Republican ticket. Conservatives in Halifax County employed a similar tactic by selecting African Americans as two of their three nominees for the House of Delegates. David Canada ran for the House of Delegates, too. The True Republican ticket carried the county by fewer than sixty votes, and the Conservatives also won all three of the county's seats in the House of Delegates. One of the African American victors, Alexander Owen, was a former slave of William L. Owen, a white planter and merchant who had served in the convention with Canada, and reportedly voted in the legislature as his erstwhile master ordered.

What happened to Canada after he lost the election in 1869 is unknown. He probably left Halifax County before the census was taken in 1870. For a few years, however, David Canada took a prominent

part in dramatic political events and provided leadership for the freedpeople of Halifax County.

Lowe, "Virginia's Reconstruction Convention," 348 (first quotation); son's birth recorded on undated MS page ca. 1868–1872 inserted in BVS Birth Register, Halifax Co., 1866; BVS Death Certificate, Mecklenburg Co., 17 Aug. 1919, for a Ulysses Grant Cannady (b. ca. 1872), lists father's birthplace as Halifax Co.; monthly reports, Halifax Co., Mar. 1866–Dec. 1868, Freedmen's Bureau Records; Personal Property Tax Returns, Halifax Co., 1866–1870, RG 48, LVA; *Richmond Daily*

Dispatch, 13, 26 Sept., 23, 24 Oct. 1867, 7, 12 July 1869; *Richmond Southern Opinion*, 21 Dec. 1867 (third quotation), 28 Mar. 1868 (caricature); *Daily Richmond Whig*, 2 Apr., 2 May (fifth quotation), 20 (fourth quotation), 29 July, 5, 28 Oct. (second quotation) 1868, 16, 18, 26 June 1869; *Petersburg Index*, 3 Aug. 1868; Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856–70* (1991), 120–129, 148–155, 165–179; *Journal of 1867–1868 Convention*, 3, 28; *Debates and Proceedings of 1867–1868 Convention*, 486, 495, 520–521; Hume, "Membership of Convention of 1867–1868," 479–481; Halifax Co. Minute Book, 21:296.

Source: Kneebone, John T. "Canada, David." In *The Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 2, edited by Sara B. Bearss et al., 587–589. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2001.



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