

COLE, George William (d. after 10 June 1880), member of the House of Delegates, was born in Athens, Georgia, late in the 1840s. The record of his 1879 marriage identified his parents, William Cole and Martha Cole, as freedpersons, but little else is known of his youth. By early in the 1870s he was living in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Inspired perhaps by his parents or by the heady events of emancipation and Reconstruction, Cole developed a desire for education and self-improvement. In 1872 he enrolled in the junior class of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (later Hampton University). Having earned promotion to the middle class, Cole left the school during the 1873–1874 academic year. By 1879 he had made his way to Essex County, where he found work as a teacher and probably also farmed. On 21 April 1879 Cole married Edith Banks, a native of the county. They had at least one daughter.

Cole must have impressed natives of Essex as a reliable and promising figure. A black-majority county that had previously elected several Republicans, white and black, to the General Assembly, Essex possessed no shortage of viable African American politicians. Although more-stringent suffrage restrictions passed in 1876 had allowed Essex Conservatives to triumph in the election of 1877, blacks remained a potent political force. Complicating matters was the escalating conflict over the state debt, which split white Conservatives into two factions: Funders, who believed that the state's honor and future ability to secure capital depended on paying off the antebellum debt and its accrued interest in full, and Readjusters, who favored restructuring the debt in order to allow the state to sustain and perhaps improve the funding of various programs, particularly education. Out of this tense political environment Cole emerged in 1879 as the

Republican candidate for the county's seat in the House of Delegates.

It is uncertain on which side of the debt issue Cole campaigned. Republicans had generally supported full funding of the debt. Conservative newspaper accounts of the race called Cole a Funder, cited him as a supporter of the McCullough Act (the Funders' solution), and used his victory as evidence that Readjusters had not won a majority in the General Assembly. Most black voters, however, had begun to favor restructuring, if not repudiating, the debt. Cole's victory over the Conservative candidate John R. Motley by a vote of 803 to 635 in a county that favored the Readjuster position suggests that Cole probably expressed at least an openness to restructuring the state debt.

In the House of Delegates, which opened its session on 3 December 1879, Cole joined fifteen other Republicans (ten of them African American) who formed a wedge between virtually equal numbers of Funders and Readjusters. Both of the latter groups jockeyed for the support of Republicans. After brokering satisfactory agreements with Readjuster leaders, Cole and the other black Republicans sided with the Readjusters and gave them a comfortable voting majority. The new coalition immediately voted in its slate of House officeholders, including a few African Americans, who replaced Confederate veterans in minor functions. Cole supported legislation lowering the tax on vendors of malt liquor, spirits, and wine and also a proposed constitutional amendment to repeal the poll tax as a prerequisite for voting. He voted to elect the Readjuster chief William Mahone to the United States Senate and for the so-called Riddleberger Bill, which, although vetoed, became the basis of the Readjusters' successful restructuring of the state debt in the next legislative session. During his one term Cole did not propose any major

legislation. He served on the relatively insignificant Committee on Labor and Poor, which may offer some indication of his policy interests.

Nothing certain is known about Cole's life after his term in the House ended on 9 March 1880. Later that year the census enumerator in Essex County listed him as a farmer. There is no indication in the land and tax records that he owned any property in the county, so if he did farm, he probably rented or worked as a tenant. Cole does not seem to have sought political office in Essex again and appears in no subsequent county records. Most likely he left the county to pursue other opportunities, but it is not known where he might have gone. Records from Washington, D.C., identify several men named George W. Cole, but although

their ages and occupations offer plausible possibilities, no evidence ties any of them directly to the former Virginia legislator. Whatever his fate, George William Cole's significance lay in his brief role in one of the most important political movements in nineteenth-century Virginia.

Essex Co. Marriage Register (including full name, birthplace, and parents' names and status and giving age as thirty on 21 Apr. 1879); Census, Essex Co., 1880 (age thirty-three on 9–10 June 1880); Election Records, no. 14, RG 13, LVA; *Richmond State*, 6 Nov., 9 Dec. 1879, 2 Mar. 1880; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 7, 15 Nov. 1879, 2 Mar. 1880; *JHD*, 1879–1880 sess., 30, 59–63, 97, 381–386, 389–394, 398–399, 401–404.

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