

COLEMAN, Asa (d. after 24 February 1893), member of the House of Delegates, was born into slavery early in the 1830s, probably in North Carolina. The names of his parents are not known. He grew up on a Person County farm owned by William Bailey, who later sold him to Joseph Pointer, another county farmer who owned sixty-seven slaves in 1860 and who may have brought him to Virginia. Coleman learned to read but not to write. He was married, probably by 1858, to a woman named Amanda, a Tennessee native, born about 1839, whose maiden name is not recorded. They had at least one son. It is not known when or under what circumstances Coleman secured his freedom nor when he came to Virginia. His name first appears in the Halifax County tax records in 1869, and by the next year he was working as a carpenter. In June 1872 he bought at public auction 150 acres of land, for which he paid \$982.50. The county court approved the deed and conveyed it to him in March 1875.

In 1871 Coleman finished second in a field of seven candidates and won election as one of three Radical Republicans representing Halifax County in the House of Delegates. Serving in three sessions from 6 December 1871 to 2 April 1873, he sat on the Committee on Asylums and Prisons. Coleman supported an unsuccessful attempt to repeal an 1870 act that authorized chain gangs and voted with the minority to sustain a bill to prevent punishment by whipping. He sponsored a bill authorizing Halifax County residents to vote on purchasing a local bridge in order to eliminate its tolls, introduced a resolution petitioning Congress to set aside public lands for the education of African Americans living in the South, and proposed that the Committee on Schools and Colleges admit to white public schools all children of white fathers. In 1872 Coleman and other black legislators traveled to Washington, D.C., where they met with the

president and sought his support for a civil rights bill then in Congress.

Of major concern to Coleman and the other House members was the crushing state debt created during the antebellum period to finance internal improvements. Conservatives were divided on how to pay the debt. One faction, called Funders, advocated full payment to preserve the state's honor and credit rating, while Readjusters proposed paying only a portion and funneling remaining resources to distressed sectors of Virginia society. The controversial Funding Act, passed in March 1871 to remedy the fiscal crisis, only deepened the state's financial woes. Coleman was on authorized leave when the House voted on 15 December 1871 to suspend the act, but on 5 January 1872 he voted with the majority in favor of a joint resolution to discontinue the issuance of bonds for funding the public debt. He voted with the majority on 2 March to override the governor's veto and pass a bill prohibiting the use of bond coupons to pay taxes and debts, thereby repealing a key provision of the Funding Act. Coleman did not stand for reelection in 1873. In November of that year he sat on a Halifax jury.

In August 1875 Coleman served on the Resolutions Committee at a Richmond convention called by black legislators to address the lack of jobs. About one hundred African American delegates from across the state formed a short-lived Laboring Men's Mechanics' Union Association, adopted a resolution supporting readjustment of the state debt, and called for better educational opportunities for black children. In November 1875 Coleman unsuccessfully ran for another term in the House of Delegates but finished fourth in a field of six candidates. He did not again seek a seat in the General Assembly.

Although Coleman apparently did not hold any county offices, he remained

politically active. Like many other African Americans, he abandoned the declining Republican Party and joined the Readjusters. Led by the former Confederate general William Mahone, the Readjusters broke with Conservatives, formed their own party, and at an 1884 convention declared themselves the new Republican Party of Virginia. Coleman was elected chair of the Halifax County Republican Party, and on 11 May 1888 he attended a meeting of Sixth District Republicans at Liberty (later Bedford City), in Bedford County. He campaigned on behalf of Patrick Henry McCaull, the district's nominee for the House of Representatives, and corresponded with Mahone on how best to manage party affairs, but McCaull lost the November election.

In June 1883 Amanda Coleman died of consumption (probably tuberculosis), and by April 1888 Coleman had married a woman named Mary, whose surname is undocumented. Asa Coleman last appears in the public record on 24 February 1893, when he deeded to his wife and his other heirs his remaining eighty-nine acres, his house, furniture, all personal property, and a cow and a calf. The date and circumstances of his death are not known. He was buried in

the Coleman family cemetery near Virgilina, in Halifax County, but his grave marker is no longer legible.

Biographies in *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 20 Aug. 1875 (age given as forty-four), Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, 8 (with birth year of 1845), and Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction*, rev. ed. (1996), 48 (variant birthplace of South Carolina); Census, Halifax Co., 1870 (age thirty-eight on 2 Sept. 1870), 1880 (age forty-seven on 17 June 1880); Personal Property Tax Returns (1869–1883) and Land Tax Returns (1876–1882), Halifax Co., RG 48, LVA; Halifax Co. Deed Book, 64:272; Halifax Co. Minute Book, 23:380; Election Records, nos. 4 (1871), 10 (1875), RG 13, LVA; *JHD*, 1871–1872 sess., 32, 63, 124, 170, 389, 1872–1873 sess., 37, 155, 207, 249; *Richmond Daily Whig*, 9 Nov. 1871; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 21 Aug. 1875; Coleman to William Mahone, 8 Sept. 1888, Mahone Papers, Duke; Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (1951), 1:636–637 (mistakenly identified as A. C. Coleman); 1893 deed in Halifax Co. Deed Book, 84:419–420.

Source: Gunter, Donald W. "Coleman, Asa." In *The Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 3, edited by Sara B. Bearss et al., 356–358. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2006



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