

Cephas L. Davis (ca. November 1839–May 26, 1907), member of the Senate of Virginia, was born into slavery in Christiansville (later Chase City), in Mecklenburg County, and was the son of Cephas Davis and Annie (sometimes noted as Frances) Davis. Most likely he gained his freedom at the end of the Civil War. His contemporaries' comments and recollections suggest that Davis may have attended Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (later Hampton University) or the Richmond Theological School for Freedmen (later Virginia Union University), but his name does not appear in the records of either school. In 1869 and 1870 he taught former slaves in Maryland for the American Baptist Home Mission Society.

In August 1871, as a licentiate of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, in Washington, D.C., Davis delivered the introductory sermon at the first annual meeting of the Bluestone Colored Baptist Association in Mecklenburg County. Ordained a minister in August 1873, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, in Chase City. The following year he accepted additional pastorates at Bluestone Baptist Church and Clarksville's Mount Zion Baptist Church. Davis served as clerk of the Bluestone Association in 1874 and 1875 and during the latter year also acted as moderator *pro tempore*. In August 1878 he again preached the opening sermon at the association's annual meeting.

Davis taught in Mecklenburg for the Home Mission Society in 1871 and 1872. About 1878 he sought a position at a local school that the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s Board of Missions for Freedmen had recently established. Citing reservations about Davis's moral fitness, the schoolmaster declined to recommend him. After his rejection, Davis sponsored a resolution at a Bluestone Association meeting that threatened to excommunicate from the church all parents who permitted their children to attend the school. To restore the parents' confidence in the school, a fellow minister presented the association with

evidence that Davis had fathered several children out of wedlock and asked that he be expelled from the ministry. Surviving minutes of the association do not list Davis as a pastor in 1880 or 1884, although he attended the annual meeting in 1880 and in that year was invited to preach on church government.

In 1876 Davis sought a vacant seat in the Senate of Virginia. He dropped out of the race late in September, but his outrage at what he considered the illegal nomination of a black Readjuster compelled him to reenter the contest as an independent candidate. His name did not appear on the ballot in November, however. In June 1879 Davis won the Republican nomination for a seat representing Charlotte and Mecklenburg Counties in the Senate. Described as a "jet black Radical," he received 1,052 votes out of 2,629 cast in the November election to defeat a Conservative and a Readjuster. Like many other African Americans, Davis initially had suspicions about the Readjusters, a biracial coalition led by former Confederate general William Mahone that sought to repudiate a portion of the state's massive antebellum debt; but by mid-November 1879 he seemed ready to join the Readjusters when he wrote to Mahone asking for his support "should there be any further steps taken to deprive me of the office."

Davis had to borrow money for the fare to Richmond, but Readjusters arranged his lodging at one of the city's hotels. Early in January 1880 a Richmond restaurant denied Davis and his two companions service. He unsuccessfully invoked the Fifteenth Amendment and told the white proprietor that he was tired of hearing the term Confederate and that the old guard should become accustomed to taking a "back seat."

During his single Senate term that lasted from December 3, 1879 to March 9, 1880, Davis held the lowest-ranking seats on the Committees on Privileges and Elections, on Banks, and on Immigration. Early in December he proclaimed himself a Readjuster and declared on the Senate floor that other party members

treated him as an equal. His attitude mirrored that of other black politicians, whose support enabled Readjusters to consolidate their power through use of patronage and concessions on such key issues as repealing the poll tax. Davis may also have found the party's promise of better schools attractive. His own efforts included introducing a resolution to establish a college for African Americans at Chase City. A Charlotte County newspaper chided Davis for opposing the \$1 capitation tax designated for schools; but his objection arose most likely because voters were required to present their receipts for the fee at the polls. He and other black members of the General Assembly helped elect Mahone to the United States Senate. In February 1880 Davis voted in favor of a bill that disavowed part of the state debt.

Davis did not seek reelection. He remained Mahone's ally and continued to correspond with him about political matters. Davis also made several pleas for appointments to office or for money to help stave off financial embarrassment. In January 1883 he resigned, or was replaced, as deputy collector of internal revenue in nearby Halifax County. Davis still enjoyed local support, however, and in May he won election as a Mecklenburg County justice of the peace. In that year supporters floated his name for the House of Delegates race, but by August his candidacy had faded.

Early in 1884 Davis was jailed for failing to pay a fine following his conviction for resisting a police officer. In May he successfully petitioned for his release so that he might

request a new trial. Davis's application to have the verdict set aside was rejected, and, because he had not satisfied the fine, the court issued another writ against him.

In 1877 Davis and a man who may have been his brother acquired 1.5 acres in Chase City, and in 1882 the former state senator purchased a town lot. On March 15, 1886 both properties were sold at public auction. By the next year Davis had moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, where he taught school and served as principal of the Normal Theological Institute for the 1892–1893 academic term. In 1890 he mounted an unsuccessful congressional campaign. He was very likely the C. L. Davis who served as moderator of the Rowan Baptist Association in 1890 and as pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, in Charlotte, from 1893 through 1897. Information regarding Davis's final decade remains elusive. In May 1898 the *Washington Post* announced that on June 23 he would call to order a Colored Republican League of Virginia meeting in Charlottesville. By 1902 Davis had moved to Philadelphia, where he served as the president of a social organization. A 1904 newspaper article reported that an African American minister with the same was arrested for falsely collecting money for an Alexandria-based school. Suffering from dementia in his final days, Cephas L. Davis died on May 26, 1907, at a Philadelphia hospital of arteriosclerosis. He was buried at Merion Memorial Park, near Philadelphia in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Contributed by Donald W. Gunter for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, a publication of the Library of Virginia.

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