

**Ballard Trent Edwards** (ca. October 10, 1828–March 27, 1881), member of the House of Delegates, was of mixed-race ancestry. His parents, Edward Bradbury Edwards and Mary Ann Trent Edwards, were members of the free African American community in his native town of Manchester, in Chesterfield County. On August 23, 1850, Edwards married Sarah Ann Coy, who had been born free in Powhatan County. Of their twelve children, six daughters and three sons survived childhood. Edwards identified himself as a brick mason in the 1860 census. Surviving documents do not indicate whether he participated in the Civil War, after which he opened a school in Manchester.

By the time of his marriage, Edwards had probably succeeded his father, a carpenter, as clerk of the African Church of Manchester. Beginning in 1867 he served for many years as clerk of the Colored Shiloh Baptist Association of Virginia, composed of churches in central Virginia. As one of the congregation's leaders in 1872, Edwards probably helped persuade Anthony Binga to become pastor of the church, known after the Civil War as First Baptist Church in Manchester (and later known as First Baptist Church of South Richmond).

Having acquired property in or near Manchester during the 1860s, Edwards bought and sold several lots in Manchester between 1869 and 1873 and in 1875 owned city lots valued at \$1,750. He placed ownership of most of his property in a trust that he managed for the benefit of his wife, thus effectively securing the family's home from debts that he might incur in his business.

Edwards attended the Republican State Convention in April 1867. Later that year he served as secretary of an all-black meeting of Manchester Republicans who supported James B. Carter as a candidate for the state constitutional convention called to comply with federal Reconstruction legislation. On July 6, 1869, Edwards was one of two African American men elected to the House of Delegates from the three-member district of

Chesterfield and Powhatan Counties. The unfriendly *Richmond Daily Dispatch* characterized the three victors as "*Ultra Radicals*." They defeated the Conservative candidates by about 500 votes out of almost 6,000 cast, which corresponded to the margin of black voters over white voters in the two counties.

At a short session that met in October, Edwards voted to ratify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution as required by Congress before Virginia could be readmitted to the United States. During the two sessions that met in 1870 and in 1870–1871, Edwards sat on the relatively inconsequential Committee on Manufactures and Mechanic Arts. In 1870 the General Assembly approved a bill creating the state's first public school system. Fighting to secure their equal rights of citizenship, Edwards and most of the African American delegates had attempted to strike out the requirement that schools be racially segregated. After their proposal was overwhelmingly defeated, he joined other bold legislators in casting a symbolic vote against passage of the school bill that he almost certainly favored. In March 1871 he and almost all of the African American legislators voted for the Funding Act of 1871 to pay off the large antebellum state debt at 6 percent interest.

Legislative records contain virtually no information about his participation in the passage of a bill in November 1870 to erect a bridge over the James River between Manchester and Richmond that permitted free passage to Manchester residents. The Manchester town trustees proposed the bridge, probably to enable residents to travel to their jobs in Richmond without having to pay tolls to cross the existing bridges. Because the bill originated in the Senate of Virginia, it is probable that Edwards's role in the House of Delegates was supportive and that later accounts that gave him almost sole credit for the measure's passage were exaggerated.

Some of the bills that Edwards suggested indicate that he was concerned about the vulnerability of freedpeople in the new free-labor economy. He proposed to regulate the practice of paying wages in company scrip rather than in cash; to limit the length of the workday for laborers on public projects so that they could attend school; to require that farmers enclose their lands with good fences; to forbid railroads, steamboat companies, and other common carriers from adopting rules "which shall have a tendency to make a difference in travel on account of race or color"; to reduce the toll on the existing bridge between Manchester and Richmond; to pay salaries to magistrates; and to repeal the severe vagrancy act of January 1866, which was reminiscent of the prewar black code and empowered local authorities to jail or hire out at hard labor people suspected of having no gainful employment. During the session that met in the winter of 1870–1871 Edwards suggested that a bill be drafted to require that railroads fence their lines because rail companies did not compensate peoples whose livestock was killed by trains. None of his numerous proposals passed.

Edwards recommended on February 17, 1870, that the shabby-looking Capitol be painted, but nothing had been done by April 27, when a gallery in the overcrowded courtroom collapsed into the room below and killed about sixty people. Three days later he suggested that the Committee on Public Buildings "enquire into the expediency of taking down the building to the floors of the senate and house of delegates and rebuilding the same." The special committee in charge of the repairs sought the opinions of engineers and builders, but surviving records do not indicate whether Edwards, who was not a member of the committee, offered it advice, or whether, if he offered advice, the committee paid it any attention. During the weeks between the disaster and the decision to repair the Capitol, articles appeared in Richmond newspapers suggesting that the old building be razed and replaced, and

members of the assembly probably discussed the possibility. According to an undocumented tradition, Edwards delivered a stirring speech about the building's great architectural value and its association with Thomas Jefferson and the founding of the nation and persuaded the assembly not to demolish and replace the Capitol. The only extended reference to a speech was not published until nearly a century after his death, and it evidently conflated and misinterpreted his two motions and probably exaggerated the willingness of white legislators to heed the oratory of a black colleague. The legislative records do not even indicate that Edwards was involved the following year when the assembly ordered the Capitol be painted and the roof repaired.

Although Edwards proudly identified himself to the 1870 census enumerator as a member of the legislature rather than by his occupation, he had not given up his profession; two young apprentice brickmakers then resided with the family. He attended the Republican State Convention that spring. In 1871, when Edwards and the other Radical delegate from Chesterfield County ran for reelection, they lost to Conservatives. He was an overseer of the poor in Chesterfield County and a magistrate after Manchester became a city in 1874. In the latter year the Republican minority in the assembly nominated him for clerk of the House of Delegates. Edwards ran for a seat in the Senate of Virginia as a Republican who favored paying off in full Virginia's pre-Civil War public debt but in November 1879 was easily defeated. He was a commissioner of elections for Manchester in 1880 and attended a meeting of black Republicans early in March of the following year.

In 1880 the census enumerator listed Edwards as a plasterer; by that time he may have begun to specialize in finishing interiors rather than in construction. He was the senior lay leader of the First Baptist Church in Manchester, when the trustees borrowed money to build a new brick church, but the brick mason

and plasterer did not live to see completion of what may have been one of the largest churches in the city. Ballard Trent Edwards died at his

Manchester home on March 27, 1881, and was buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery.

Contributed by Brent Tarter for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, a publication of the Library of Virginia.

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