

Joseph P. Evans (January 5, 1835–May 16, 1889), member of the House of Delegates and of the Senate of Virginia, was born in Dinwiddie County. His parents, Joseph Evans and Eliza Evans, were enslaved. Evans reported later in life that he had learned to read and write as a young child, and he seems to have enjoyed a certain amount of latitude relative to the lives of most other slaves. At about the age of twelve he moved to Petersburg, where he hired out his time as a whitewasher and plasterer. According to a contemporary newspaper account, he had earned enough money by 1859 to purchase his freedom and to become a member of Petersburg's substantial free black community. Evans established a kiosk where he sold newspapers and magazines during the Civil War. On an unrecorded date he married an enslaved woman named Josephine C., a union that likely gained an official sanction after the war had ended. They had at least four daughters and five sons, including William W. Evans, who served one term in the House of Delegates and edited the *Virginia Lancet*, a Republican newspaper.

After the war, Evans advertised his services as a whitewasher and joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which organized its Virginia Conference in 1866. He was ordained as a minister about 1868 and took charge of a church in Fredericksburg. During this time Evans also studied at the Richmond Theological School for Freedmen (later Virginia Union University). After returning to Petersburg in 1871, he served as the presiding elder of the Petersburg district and then as the missionary agent for the Virginia Conference.

Evans's religious activities likely reinforced his leadership role within the African American communities of Petersburg and Fredericksburg. On April 11, 1867, he addressed the organizational meeting of the Union Republican Association in Petersburg, and a week later he joined eight other men in representing the city at the Republican State

Convention. He delivered orations at Fredericksburg emancipation celebrations in 1869 and 1870. On October 25, 1871, Evans and John W. B. Matthews secured nomination over at least four white contenders as the Republican candidates for the two seats representing Petersburg in the House of Delegates. On election day, both men outpolled their Conservative white opponents by about 550 votes of approximately 3,500 votes cast. During the three assembly sessions that met between December 1871 and April 1873, Evans served on the Committee on Counties, Cities, and Towns. He introduced several resolutions and amendments designed to improve the status of African Americans within the legislature and in the larger society. His most forceful proposal would have mandated that grand juries considering cases involving African Americans be at least evenly divided between black and white members. Evans impressed contemporary observers, one of whom described him as "very intelligent, very civil," and as having "the good will of everybody . . . as a peaceable and well-disposed man."

In 1873 Evans won election by a margin of 506 votes of 6,844 cast to fill an unexpired term in the Senate of Virginia representing the city of Petersburg and Prince George and Surry Counties. He sat on the Committee on County, City and Township Organizations. During the 1874 session Evans led opposition to a proposed new charter for Petersburg that Conservatives had drafted as a means to thwart black influence in the city, but the Senate's Conservative majority overwhelmed his efforts. Although that particular charter did not survive a veto, other laws circumscribed black electoral efforts in Petersburg and led to a Conservative resurgence in the city. Evans was not the Republican nominee in the 1875 race for the district's Senate seat.

Evans served as president of a statewide convention of African Americans held in Richmond in August 1875. To advance the economic and social interests of the state's

blacks, the convention established the Laboring Men's Mechanics' Union Association. Evans became president of the short-lived organization and also oversaw its Committee on Petitions and Grievances. Financially secure as a result of patronage appointments, first as an inspector at the Petersburg customhouse and beginning in 1876 as a letter carrier, Evans remained a leading Republican in Petersburg. The party's position continued to weaken, however, and eventually splits developed between those who wished to align with the Readjusters (who sought a partial repudiation of the state debt and to refinance the remainder at a lower rate of interest) and those, known as straightouts, who preferred to retain a purer partisan identity. Evans advocated the latter strategy.

In 1884 straightout Republicans from the Fourth District, comprising Petersburg and eleven counties lying south of the James River, attempted to nominate Evans as the Republican candidate for Congress but had their efforts blocked by supporters of the party wing led by former Readjusters. A breakaway group then

nominated Evans, who drew enthusiastic support from African American voters and from several important white leaders, including Governor William Evelyn Cameron. Evans staked his underfunded but spirited campaign on his opposition to the machine politics that he asserted had denied him the nomination and on his displeasure with the marginalization of African Americans within the Republican coalition. He garnered 6,451 votes, a little more than half the winning total of the regular Republican candidate, James Dennis Brady, and also well behind the Democratic nominee.

The campaign devastated Evans financially and may have contributed to a sharp emotional decline during his last years. He was ruled insane in December 1886 and may have spent some time as a patient in the Central Lunatic Asylum, in Petersburg. After four months of ill health, Joseph P. Evans died on May 16, 1889, at his son's home in Petersburg. He was interred in one of the several contiguous Petersburg burial grounds later known collectively as People's Memorial Cemetery.

Contributed by William Bland Whitley for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, a publication of the Library of Virginia.

Sources Consulted

Biographies

Richmond *Daily Dispatch*, Aug. 20, 1875

Petersburg *Daily Index-Appeal*, Sept. 2, 1884 (with birth date), excerpted in *New-York Times*, Sept. 5, 1884

Luther Porter Jackson, *Negro Office Holders in Virginia, 1865–1895* (1945), 14–15

Primary Sources

Election results in Election Record no. 4 (1871) and no. 2 (1873), Secretary of the Commonwealth, Election Records, 1776–1941, Accession 26041, State Government Records Collection, Library of Virginia.

Petersburg City Minute Book (1887–1889), 451, 515, 539, 717, Library of Virginia

Death Register, City of Petersburg, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Health, Record Group 36, Library of Virginia

Secondary Source

William D. Henderson, *Gilded Age City: Politics, Life, and Labor in Petersburg, Virginia, 1874–1889* (1980), esp. 17, 177–183

Newspapers

Petersburg Index, April 12, 1867

Petersburg Daily Progress, October 26, November 8, 1871

Richmond Daily Dispatch, September 19, 1873 (quotation), August 23, 1875

Petersburg Index and Appeal, November 5, 1873; November 17, 1874; December 20, 1886

Richmond Enquirer, August 21 1875

Petersburg Lancet, September 13, November. 29, 1884

New-York Times, November 3, 1884

Obituaries and Funeral Notice

Petersburg Daily Index-Appeal, May, 17, 21, 1889

Fredericksburg *Free Lance*, May 24, 1889



LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA