

**Peter George Morgan** (October 21, 1817–March 15, 1890), member of the Convention of 1867–1868 and of the House of Delegates, was born into slavery in Nottoway County. The names of his mother and father are unknown. He was of mixed-race ancestry, possibly including Native American. Little is known about his early life, but he trained as a shoemaker and was allowed to hire himself out to work. Despite being enslaved Morgan was identified as a white man in the 1850 census, living in a household with another shoemaker and a saddler.

About 1840 Morgan married an enslaved woman named Julia Ann Jackson. They had at least three sons and four daughters. During the 1850s Morgan purchased his own freedom from Thomas H. Fowlkes for about \$1,500, and about 1858 he purchased his wife and two daughters for another \$1,500. During the Civil War the family moved to Petersburg, where Morgan, in compliance with state law, registered as a free negro in 1863. At that time, the clerk recorded his date of manumission as July 7, 1857, although Morgan's son-in-law later recalled the date as July 4, 1854. On January 15, 1864, Morgan emancipated his wife, the two daughters he had purchased, and a third daughter who had been born in the meantime.

Following the war, Morgan operated a saloon. Likely well known in his community, he was nominated in September 1867 by the radical wing of the Republican Party as a candidate to represent Petersburg at a convention called to rewrite Virginia's constitution as required by the Reconstruction Act passed by Congress earlier that year. Morgan advocated a higher tax imposed on property of more than 400 acres, a

poll tax, and the removal of any race-related words from the state constitution. African American men, voting for the first time, overwhelmingly elected Morgan and fellow Republican James Henry Platt at the polls on October 22.

At the convention, which began on December 3, 1867, Morgan served on the Committee on the Elective Franchise and Qualifications for Office, the Committee on Currency, Banking, and Insurance Companies, and briefly on the Committee on Military Affairs. He remained largely silent during the convention, though he defended the elections committee when another delegate attacked the pace of its work. To aid the process of Virginia's readmission to the United States, Morgan proposed a committee to collect the names of Union supporters who had been disfranchised by the Reconstruction Acts, in order to facilitate the restoration of their rights. He generally sided with the Radicals, although he voted against a measure to disfranchise whites who supported secessionist candidates for the 1861 convention and against a measure to require integration in the new public schools. He joined the Radicals in supporting John Curtiss Underwood as the convention's president, and approved of the test oath pledge to prevent former Confederates from holding state office. Morgan joined the majority in voting against requiring segregation in public schools and against a clause that failed to give black males the right to vote. He did not participate in the April 17, 1868, vote approving the new constitution, which was ratified in a public referendum on July 6, 1869.

During the general election held at the same time, Morgan won a seat representing Petersburg in the House of

Delegates. He and Republican Party activist George Fayerman each garnered more than 2,700 votes while their Conservative opponents each received about 1,800 votes. At a short session that met in October, Morgan 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, Morgan sat on the Committees of Privileges and Elections and on Schools and Colleges. In 1870 the General Assembly approved a bill creating the state's first public school system. Fighting to secure their equal rights of citizenship, Morgan and most of the African American delegates had attempted to strike out the requirement that schools be racially segregated. After their measure was overwhelmingly defeated, he joined other bold legislators in casting a symbolic vote against passage of the school bill that he almost certainly favored.

During his tenure he proposed two bills related to fishing on the James River and served on a special committee appointed in 1870 to report on the legality of fellow delegate William H. Andrews's arrest on charges of drunk and disorderly conduct and assault. He opposed a resolution calling for a committee to confer with railroad executives about providing segregated railcars, arguing that laws should protect the civil rights of African Americans. On March 28, 1871, Morgan joined the majority of Republicans and many Conservatives when he voted for a bill that provided for the payment of the antebellum state debt, which totaled more than \$45 million. The Funding Act proved disastrous and was later regarded as one of the state's most ill-advised

pieces of economic legislation. Morgan did not run for a second term in 1871.

He worked in his community to help disadvantaged African Americans. In December 1868 he joined other black and white men in establishing a dual board for the Petersburg Relief Association. Believing, however, that assistance was provided disproportionately to white residents, some of the African American members soon formed a separate Impartial Relief Association, of which Morgan was elected president on January 19, 1869. Later that year, he was one of the founding directors of the People's Savings Bank of the City of Petersburg. He continued to serve as a director into the 1870s, although the bank ultimately failed, possibly as a result of the financial crisis in 1873.

Morgan remained involved in Republican Party politics, attending state conventions and sitting on the party's state committee during the 1870s. He held a patronage position as a revenue collector at the customhouse into the 1880s. In 1872 Morgan won a seat on Petersburg's city council. During his first term, he was embroiled in controversy when he and other council members fought against a proposed city charter that would have eliminated elective city offices in favor of appointments by a municipal judge, which was vetoed by the governor in March 1874. Morgan won a second two-year term that May, although voter suppression and intimidation ensured that Conservatives won a large majority of the council seats. He was an advocate for the city's public schools and urged employment of African American teachers in the segregated schools. Morgan lost his bids for reelection to the council in 1876 and in 1880. Early in the 1880s he

participated in a movement to obtain state and federal funds to deepen Petersburg's harbor, which was unable to compete with larger operations in cities such as Norfolk. Morgan made speeches and signed a petition to the city council in support of improvements to the harbor. By 1883 he joined other Republicans in supporting the Readjusters, a biracial coalition that won control of the General Assembly in 1879 and passed legislation in 1882 that reduced payment on the state's public debt in order to provide funds for public schools and other services. In 1888 he

succeeded in winning a third term on the council.

Morgan maintained his commitment to education and served as a trustee when his son-in-law, James Solomon Russell, incorporated Saint Paul Normal and Industrial School (later Saint Paul's College), in Lawrenceville in 1890. While visiting his daughter, Peter George Morgan fell ill and died at Russell's Lawrenceville home on March 15, 1890. He was buried next to his wife, who had died in 1888, at People's Memorial Cemetery, in Petersburg.

Contributed by Philip W. Stanley for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, a publication of the Library of Virginia.

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