

Frederick Smith Norton (d. November 14, 1893), member of the House of Delegates, was born into slavery late in the 1820s in or near Williamsburg. The names of his parents are not recorded, but he came from a mixed-race background, possibly the son of an enslaved woman and her owner. His two brothers, younger by more than a decade, Daniel M. Norton and Robert Norton, escaped from slavery in Virginia to freedom in New York during the middle of the 1850s. Whether F. S. Norton, as he was often identified, or F. Smith Norton, as he signed his will in the 1880s, gained his freedom before 1865 is uncertain because little is recorded about him before 1869. He married a woman named Frances Ann, surname unknown, and had a son by 1870.

Soon after the end of the Civil War, Norton's brothers returned to Virginia, became active in York County politics, and formed the Lone Star, a beneficial organization for freedmen. Daniel M. Norton won election to and served in the Convention of 1867–1868 that wrote a new state constitution. All three brothers ran for office in 1869. Daniel M. Norton lost a race for Congress, but on July 6, 1869, Robert Norton won a seat in the House of Delegates. On the same day and by a margin of about two-to-one, F. S. Norton defeated Republican Charles Wilson Buttz, a white native of Pennsylvania and future congressman from South Carolina, to win the seat in the House of Delegates representing Williamsburg and James City County. Buttz challenged the result on the grounds that Norton's name was really Frederick Smith and some voters may not have known for whom they were voting, but the House of Delegates seated Norton

with the understanding that the district's voters realized that he was known by both names.

At a short session of the General Assembly that met in October, Norton voted to ratify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution as required by Congress before Virginia could be readmitted to the United States. He served on the Committee of Claims during his single two-year term. During the second session, he introduced two bills that did not pass, one to ban hunting of deer between September 1 and January 1, and the other to regulate payment of debts created before the collapse of the Confederacy in April 1865. He joined the other African American members in calling for the expulsion of William H. Andrews, an African American who was an alcoholic, after he struck a House page with a whip, but the delegates reprimanded Andrews, instead. In 1870 the General Assembly approved a bill creating the state's first public school system. Fighting to secure their equal rights of citizenship, Norton and most of the other 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. Norton voted in March 1871 for the Funding Act to pay off the antebellum public debt at 6 percent interest. When a bill to redistrict seats in the assembly was before the House on March 14 of that year, Norton asked for the vote to be recorded. It was an important matter to him because the bill, which passed, merged his district with Robert Norton's.

The three Nortons participated in Republican Party meetings and conventions in 1869, but they did not always agree about politics. F. S. Norton may have been more sympathetic to the radical members of the party than his brothers were. At the state convention in November, the delegates selected white men for all eight vice presidents, leading him to complain that African Americans were being brought into the party like a muskrat's tail, from behind. In 1871 Robert Norton won the election in the new House district consisting of the counties of James City and York, and the following year they both attended the Republican Party's national convention, with F. S. Norton as an alternate delegate.

Little information survives about Norton's life for the eight years after his legislative term concluded in 1871. By September 9, 1879, the earliest-surviving available record, he was a member of the Williamsburg City Council and won reelection in May 1880. The next year Norton voted to allow the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company (later CSX Corporation) to lay track through the city, giving the community its first direct access to a railroad. He was not reelected in May of that year but won again in 1882. For unrecorded reasons, Norton resigned on October 12, 1882, on the date when a fight erupted in Williamsburg between competing factions of Republicans.

Between Norton's term in the House of Delegates and his service on the Williamsburg City Council, the inability of the state to pay the interest and principal on its prewar debt had divided Virginia's people and political leaders. The interest payments and the tax-receivable character of the interest coupons on the bonds produced a series

of budget deficits and depleted the funds available for the popular new public school system. The Readjuster Party, a biracial coalition founded in 1879, promised to reduce the principal and rate of interest in order to restore the cuts to the public school fund. Norton initially supported the party's agenda, even though he had voted for the Funding Act of 1871. He was a member of the Committee on Business and Platform at the 1880 Readjuster State Convention and in March 1881 represented James City County and sat on the Committee on Credentials when African American Republicans met in Petersburg and decided to affiliate with the Readjusters. His two brothers also supported the Readjusters and developed strong ties to the party's leader, William Mahone. In 1882, though, Norton endorsed the so-called Straightout Republicans who refused to join the Readjusters or support their full reform agenda in the legislature, and he predicted that Straightout candidate, John Montgomery Dawson, would poll strongly in the region in that year's contest for the House of Representatives. The following year, he nominated Dawson to run against his own brother for the state senate, a three-way race that Daniel Norton won. The Democrats won control of the General Assembly from the coalition of Readjusters and Republicans, however, with a race-baiting campaign. Two weeks later at a Williamsburg rally, F. S. Norton offered a resolution congratulating the Democrats as he moved toward affiliating with the Democratic Party.

From March 7, 1882, until January 1, 1885, Norton held a gubernatorial appointment as a curator of the fund for Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (later Hampton

University), whose members had responsibility for overseeing the use of money paid annually to the school from the federal land-grant educational fund. In 1885 he chaired the Committee on Credentials at a convention of African Americans who opposed the Republicans after Mahone merged the Republican and Readjuster Parties. At the time of Norton's death, a Williamsburg newspaper reported that

he considered himself a Democrat. Norton worked as a shoemaker and owned a house and lot in Williamsburg and twenty-three acres of land in York County. Battling sickness toward the end of his life, he signed his will on November 9, 1888. Frederick Smith Norton died of unknown causes at his Williamsburg home on November 14, 1893. The place of his burial is not known.

Contributed by Matthew S. Gottlieb for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, a publication of the Library of Virginia.

Sources Consulted

Age forty reported on July 16, 1870, in U. S. Census, Williamsburg, 1870; age fifty-one reported on June 5, 1880, in U. S. Census, Williamsburg, 1870, both in Records of the Bureau of the Census, Record Group 29, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; age eighty reported in Williamsburg *Virginia Gazette*, Nov. 17, 1893; city Council career in City of Williamsburg, City Council Record Book (1879–1895), 8, 29, 50, 57, Library of Virginia (LVA); Circuit Court City of Williamsburg, County of James City, Will Book 2, 36–37, 66–67, LVA; election result in *General Orders and Circulars, Headquarters First Military District, 1869* (1870), "Summary of the result of the election for members of the House of Delegates of Virginia, held on the 6th day of July, 1869," 18; Virginia General Assembly, House of Delegates, House Documents, Document 12, "Report of the Committee of Privileges and Elections in the Contested Election Case of Chas. W. Buttz, vs. F. S. Norton" (1870); *Journal of the House of Delegates of the State of Virginia for the Session of 1869–70* (1870), esp. 189, 220, 606, 615; Luther Porter Jackson, *Negro-Office Holders in Virginia, 1865–1896* (1945), 30; *Alexandria Gazette*, Nov. 26, 1869; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, Nov. 25, 1869; Sept. 29, 1882; Sept. 28, 1883; Nov. 18, 1883; *Richmond Dispatch*, Nov. 17, 1893 (with variant death date of Nov. 15, 1893); *Williamsburg Virginia Gazette*, Nov. 17, 1893 (with death date of Nov. 14, 1893).



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