

Robert Norton (d. by October 17, 1898), member of the House of Delegates, was born enslaved about 1840 in Williamsburg of mixed-race ancestry. He was a younger brother by about a decade of Frederick Smith Norton, who was also a member of the House of Delegates, and an elder brother of Daniel M. Norton, who was a member of the Convention of 1867–1868 and of the Senate of Virginia. They may have been sons of an enslaved woman and her owner. The identities of their parents are not known for certain, and Robert Norton provided different names for his mother on each of his two marriage records: Richard and Elizabeth without surnames in one instance, and Charlotte E. Norton in another. About the middle of the 1850s, Robert Norton and Daniel Norton escaped from slavery in Virginia to Troy, New York, and later worked as barbers in Springfield, Massachusetts. On July 29, 1862, Robert Norton married Wealthy A. Griffin in that city. They had at least two sons before she died on an unrecorded date. On March 2, 1871, after Norton returned to Virginia, he married Mary Washington in King William County. They had three daughters.

Norton and his brother returned to Virginia during the second half of 1865. In November they shipped six cases of possessions addressed to Daniel Norton at Old Point Comfort, in Elizabeth City County, where unidentified people broke into five of them, damaging or destroying property worth about \$500. Norton later opened a store that he operated, perhaps on his own or in partnership with his brother, in York County, and he also farmed in the county. Robert Norton and Daniel Norton quickly assumed leadership roles among the area's freedmen and founded a beneficial organization called Lone Star that provided support when they entered politics. In 1867 Daniel Norton won election to the Virginia

Convention that wrote a new state constitution, and Robert Norton chaired a mass meeting at Yorktown's Shiloh Baptist Church that called on the convention to prohibit taxation of oystering, an important local industry.

All three brothers ran for office in 1869. Daniel Norton lost a race for the House of Representatives that autumn, but on July 6, F. S. Norton won election to the House of Delegates from the Williamsburg–James City County district, and Robert Norton ran virtually unopposed to win York County's seat in the House of Delegates. Vote totals suggest that many white men in York County, as in some other areas of Virginia, refused to take part in the election. Unlike their elder brother who was identified as a radical Republican, the York County brothers received support from or worked with moderate members of the party, called at the time the True Republicans. A week before the election, Robert Norton introduced the moderate Republican candidate for governor, Gilbert Carlton Walker, at a Yorktown rally, and the Richmond *Daily Dispatch* characterized Norton as affiliated with the white Conservative Party when it published election results. A local periodical described him in 1870 as conservative and not loyal to any party. All three brothers were Republicans, though, and participated in party meetings in the autumn of 1869. Radicals controlled the party, but Robert Norton became a member of the party's state central committee.

In the House of Delegates, Norton had low-ranking seats on the Committees on Asylums and Prisons and on Labor and Poor and concerned himself mostly with oystering, fishing, and similar issues of importance to his constituents. At a short session that met in October, he voted to ratify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth

Amendments to the Constitution as required by Congress before Virginia could be readmitted to the United States. Norton had enough stature among the Republicans that in March 1870, he nominated the party's candidate for a seat on the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, but the assembly unsurprisingly elected a Conservative-Democrat. 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 and the other African American lawmakers almost certainly favored. Norton spoke against the segregation of public transportation on January 6, 1871, citing the Bill of Rights and the United States Constitution. 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.

After the assembly redistricted the state in 1871 and combined his district with his brother's Williamsburg–James City district, F. S. Norton did not run for reelection, and Robert Norton won a second term with almost 60 percent of the vote in a three-way race. He retained his seats on the same committees. The Norton brothers of Yorktown had a firm base of support in the county but an uneasy relationship with other Republicans in the area. On July 4, 1871, they staged a Lone Star celebration and led an estimated 7,000 people on a march through Yorktown. Norton was a member of the Republican Party state central committee, a vice president of the party's Committee on Permanent Organization in

1871, and a vice president of its state convention the following year. He was a delegate to the national convention in 1872 and served on its Committee on Credentials. Nevertheless, in that year Daniel Norton made another unsuccessful campaign for Congress as an independent Republican, and Robert Norton staged a walkout of the party convention. In 1873, though, Robert Norton won reelection to the House of Delegates with about 42 percent of the vote in a three-way race.

Norton ran as an independent Republican for the House of Representatives in 1874 for the district that included fourteen counties and the cities of Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Williamsburg in southeastern Virginia. During the campaign, the Norton brothers were involved in a series of street fights in Yorktown on October 30. Robert Norton received only 444 votes out of more than 27,000 cast, but that was enough for John Goode, a Conservative-Democrat, to defeat the Republican incumbent, James Henry Platt Jr. The divisions between the Nortons and other Republicans in the region, which included accusations that Robert Norton had received campaign assistance from Conservative Party members, featured prominently in the congressional investigation of the complaint Platt filed to contest Goode's victory. The next year, Norton finished third in an unsuccessful attempt to retain his assembly seat.

In September 1876 the white Republican leadership in the region and the African American leaders reconciled, and in 1877, Norton recaptured his seat in the House of Delegates by a vote of 454 to 378. His opponent challenged the result, but the House seated Norton based on the majority report of the Committee of Privileges and Elections. He served in the lowest-ranking position on each of his old committees. At the time Norton returned to the assembly the

most important political issue in the state was the payment of the debt that the Funding Act of 1871 authorized. The interest payments and the tax-receivable character of the interest coupons on the bonds produced large deficits and led to reductions in the money available for the new public school system. Norton and many other African Americans supported a reduction of the interest rate and of the amount of the principal in order to provide money for the schools. Readjusters, as people who were of the same opinion were called, formed a biracial political party in 1879, the year that Norton won reelection to the House of Delegates with 66 percent of the vote.

In the 1879–1880 session of the General Assembly, Readjusters and African American Republicans composed the majority in both houses of the legislature. Norton gained a seat on the prestigious Committee on Privileges and Elections. He made a seconding speech when the assembly elected the party's leader, William Mahone, to the United States Senate and got drawn into a heated debate with Conservative members who complained about cooperation between Readjusters and white and black Republicans.

Norton was a delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1880, but was also prominent at the Readjuster State Convention that nominated a slate of presidential electors pledged to the Democratic presidential candidate, Winfield Scott Hancock. Some state newspapers commented on Norton's prominence to scare white voters into supporting the Conservative Party, which nominated a different set of presidential electors pledged to Hancock. A future governor, Charles Triplett O'Ferrall, also used Norton as a campaign issue when he spoke before a group of white women and exaggerated Norton's lukewarm support for a bill

decriminalizing interracial marriage into a campaign for race mixing. A Readjuster legislator and future United States senator, Harrison Holt Riddleberger, defended Norton, who with his brother Daniel Norton, remained Republicans and campaigned for John Frederick Dezen Dorf, who defeated a Democrat and a Readjuster for Congress that year.

In March 1881 Norton attended a convention of African American Republicans in Petersburg who debated whether to merge with the Readjuster Party. Buoyed by the announcement that Mahone had joined the Republican caucus in the Senate, a majority of the delegates voted to affiliate with the Readjusters. That June, the Readjuster State Convention elected Norton to the state executive committee. Running on the Readjuster ticket, Norton easily won reelection to the House of Delegates in November 1881 with 63 percent of the vote over a white conservative and an African American Republican.

With his new party holding firm control of both houses of the General Assembly as well as the governor's office, Norton reached the pinnacle of his political influence. He chaired the Committee on Labor and Poor in the 1881–1882 session and also sat on the Committees on Federal Relations and Resolutions and on Schools and Colleges, which reported the bill that established the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (later Virginia State University) for the training of African American teachers. The assembly reformed the state's tax code, restored money to the public schools, and refinanced the debt to pay a reduced principal at a lower rate of interest. During the 1882 session, Daniel Norton in the state senate secured passage of a bill that authorized himself, Robert Norton, and three other men to operate a ferry between Yorktown and Gloucester Point.

Robert Norton found himself out of step with some local Republicans. Even as the revived Democratic Party prepared to challenge the biracial Readjuster Party as endangering white supremacy, Republicans who kept their distance from the Readjusters defeated Norton at the coalition's district convention in 1883 when he sought nomination to another term in the House of Delegates. F. S. Norton by then was on the way to affiliating with the Democratic Party, and Daniel Norton and Robert Norton both broke with Mahone about 1886, by which time many former Readjusters and some Republicans had grown dissatisfied with Mahone's leadership of the Republican Party.

In 1885 Norton was named to the board of visitors of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute to fill a short-term vacancy resulting from the dismissal of the previous board for financial irregularities. From 1890 to 1892, he 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. He continued to participate in Republican Party politics, and in 1891 was named to a committee of one hundred that anti-Mahone Republicans established to combat the Democratic Party's control of the state. At the Second Congressional District's convention in 1896, Norton sat on the committee on credentials and was elected an alternate delegate to the Republican National Convention, in Saint Louis. Robert Norton last appeared in local tax records in 1897 and he died by October 17, 1898, when his estate was valued in the personal property tax records for York County, but where, when, and how he died and where he was buried are unknown.

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

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