

Robert Davis Ruffin (June 1842– December 2, 1916), member of the House of Delegates, was born enslaved in King and Queen County and was the son of Fannie (or Fanny) Ruffin and Lewis Ruffin, who later purchased his own freedom. R. D. Ruffin, as he was usually known, probably worked as a body servant for his owner, Alexander Fleet, a former member of the House of Delegates, until he ran away about the time of his twentieth birthday. Ruffin later testified before the Southern Claims Commission that despite being treated well in slavery, "I thought freedom was better than anything else." He also reported that he became a servant for an officer in the 123d Regiment Pennsylvania Infantry until early in 1863, when he turned down an offer to work for him in his native state. Instead, Ruffin moved to Yorktown, where he took over and ran a store that his father had operated until his death in March 1863. The store was in the freedpeople's community outside the United States Army garrison. That June, soldiers from the 99th New York Infantry ransacked it, stole goods worth more than \$800, and smashed other items. Ruffin later applied for compensation from the Southern Claims Commission, but it ruled that the merchandise did not qualify for reimbursement.

Following the Civil War, Ruffin expanded his business interests, entered politics, and became involved in the first of a long train of legal controversies. He attended a state convention of African Americans in Alexandria, August 2–5, 1865, and two years later he may have campaigned as black men prepared to vote in the state for the first time to elect members of a state constitutional convention. Twice during the second half of the decade, creditors took Ruffin to the Freedmen's Bureau's court. When he did not appear on one of the charges, the court ordered him jailed for twenty-four hours.

Ruffin enrolled in Howard University, in Washington, D.C., for the 1869–1870 school year but kept his eye on Yorktown-area Republican Party politics, which was split along

racial lines. In 1870 he agreed with Richard Small Ayer, a white native of Maine who was the local member of the House of Representatives, to campaign for him in African American neighborhoods. After Ayer chose not to run for a second term, Ruffin worked for the Republican Party's white candidate against the Conservative nominee and Daniel M. Norton, an African American who ran on breakaway Republican ticket. The following year, Ruffin sued Ayer for nearly \$375 for the work he had agreed to do. Witnesses, including Oliver O. Howard, the commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands and president of Howard University, testified that they heard Ruffin agree to help Ayer because of his personal dislike of Norton. The jury awarded Ruffin \$215.

In 1871 Ruffin moved to Washington, D.C., where that summer a local politician appointed him clerk on a road project, but his speaking at Republican Party events cost him his job. Asked if his frequent campaigning affected his job performance, he told a congressional committee that he had been fired for supporting equal treatment for African American workers and as part of intra-party factionalism within the district's government. Ruffin continued his studies at Howard and graduated with a normal, or teaching, certificate in 1872, even though he studied in the law department. He then unsuccessfully sought the Republican nomination to the city's short-lived House of Delegates.

Finding his path to elective office in Washington blocked, Ruffin moved to Alexandria (later Arlington) County by May 1873. The county's Republican Party nominated him for sheriff, and the voters elected him on November 4, although he ran behind the other Republican candidates on the ticket. Ruffin assumed office on January 1, 1874, the first African American sheriff in Virginia's history according to Washington and Virginia newspapers. If not the very first, he was certainly one of the earliest, but his tenure was

brief and stormy. Even before Ruffin took office, an election commissioner stated that he was not a resident of Virginia, and a week after he took office a grand jury indicted him on perjury and illegal voting charges. A delegation of African Americans unsuccessfully tried to persuade the president and the postmaster general to appoint Ruffin postmaster of the city of Alexandria in February, which would have allowed him to resign to take the federal office, but Ruffin resigned on March 2. In April a jury found him not guilty, but he may have tried to evade the trial because the court arrested him on a bench warrant. Later in the spring, Ruffin won election as one of five Alexandria city magistrates, despite an opponent within the local Republican organization prophetically saying that the candidate planned to move to another part of Virginia.

By July 1874 Ruffin was working as an attorney, but within a few months he moved to Dinwiddie County, where the following March he qualified to practice law in the county court. On November 2, 1875, he won election to represent the county in the House of Delegates, receiving nearly 58 percent of the vote. Shortly before the election, Ruffin was arrested on a charge of forgery while he was making a campaign speech. Shortly after the election, the grand jury indicted him for practicing law without a license, and the court disbarred him in March 1876. The county court also charged Ruffin with contempt of court for demanding that African Americans serve on juries and for trying to affect the election of the clerk of court. He might also have had financial problems. The *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, a hostile Conservative Party paper, later reported that Ruffin had become mired in debt and that a fellow member of the General Assembly provided the security for the purchase of his wedding suit. On December 22, 1875, Ruffin married Susan A. Diggs in Alexandria County. They had at least four children, none of whom survived to adulthood.

In the House of Delegates Ruffin received the lowest-ranking seat on the relatively inconsequential Committee on Public Property. He survived a challenge to his election from his opponent who claimed that Ruffin was not a resident of the county, and he introduced three bills that died in committee. Ruffin's troubles escalated beginning on February 12, 1876. On his way to Dinwiddie County for the weekend, he picked up his \$6 per diem payment from the first doorkeeper of the House of Delegates, but soon thereafter the doorkeeper noticed that a \$20 bill and a \$10 bill were missing from the fund and suspected that Ruffin had taken the bills when he received the \$6. Ruffin's explanations did not satisfy the clerk, and, on February 17, the House of Delegates created a five-member committee to investigate. Three of the delegates were Republicans, but none was African American. On the committee's recommendation, the House of Delegates expelled Ruffin on February 19, by a vote of ninety-eight to three, with one of the three objecting that the courts rather than the assembly should have jurisdiction.

Ruffin planned to run for reelection and reclaim his seat, but the county's Republicans nominated Edwin Harvie Smith, father of John Ambler Smith, a former member of Congress. Ruffin then charged that the former congressman and other white Republicans had framed him for stealing from the House of Delegates. Disgusted, many of the district's African Americans sat out the special election, allowing the Conservative Party candidate to win the seat. The Richmond Court of Hustings indicted Ruffin for theft, but after he failed to show up in court on several occasions, the prosecutor dropped the case.

Ruffin resettled in Washington, D.C., by July 1876. He resumed practicing law, but that autumn was convicted and sentenced to six months in jail for accepting a stolen gold chain as payment. While he was out on bail, the court arrested him on a bench warrant. At least twice courts banned Ruffin for unethical practices,

and he continued to draw accusations of improprieties, ranging from issuing a false check, perjury, stealing 3,200 concert tickets, and using a cancelled stamp to mail a letter.

Ruffin and his wife also engaged in numerous and profitable real estate transactions. In 1890 Washington authorities arrested him for renting and selling properties that he did not own, although the charges were later dropped. Despite his time on court dockets, Ruffin acquired considerable wealth and some prestige, and he continued to participate in Republican Party politics. In 1883 he attended a national convention of African Americans that met in Louisville to address racial inequality and the loss of political and civil rights. In 1897 he chaired a public meeting that charged Treasury Department officials with unfairly dismissing African American women who worked at the Bureau of Printing and Engraving. The next year Ruffin organized a volunteer regiment of African Americans to fight in the Spanish-

American War. The unit saw no service, but in later years he was often referred to with the title of colonel. Ruffin purchased interest in coal-mining properties and in 1910 was reported to own at least 50,000 acres of land in Kentucky, although an obituary later stated that "he held a rather cloudy title" to it. In 1913 he was the principal owner of two North Dakota coal-mining companies.

About 1910 Ruffin moved to Chicago, where in 1913 an article in the *Chicago Defender* described him as owning land with timber, oil, and coal worth millions of dollars. He remained a public figure and in 1912 made one more try for elective office, finishing last in a six-way Republican Party primary for a seat in the Illinois House of Representatives. Robert Davis Ruffin died of a stroke on December 2, 1916, at a Chicago hospital. He was buried in nearby Mount Forest Cemetery in Thornton, Illinois.

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

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