

James Thomas Sammons Taylor (January 14, 1840–January 4, 1918) member of the Convention of 1867–1868, was born in Berryville. He was the son of Fairfax Taylor, an African American shoemaker who had purchased his freedom, and his first wife Ellen Sammons Taylor. By 1850 the family had moved to Charlottesville, where his father became a prominent leader in the black community. He reportedly hired a private tutor for his son and also taught him the cobbler's trade. After the United States War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops, James Taylor enlisted in the U.S.C.T.'s 2d Infantry Regiment on August 24, 1863, in Washington, D.C. Assigned to Company E, he was named acting commissary sergeant and was promoted to the post on November 10, 1863, with the rank to date from September 1. In 1864 and 1865 he sent letters to the New York *Anglo-African* describing military engagements and protesting the lack of African American officers. Taylor was accused of stealing from the commissary stores in 1864, but there are no regimental records of a trial and he was restored to duty in March 1865. While stationed in Key West, Florida, he met, courted, and on April 18, 1865, married Eliza Ann Delancy, the freeborn daughter of Bahamian immigrants. He was mustered out of the army on January 5, 1866, and took his wife back to Virginia.

Taylor returned to Charlottesville and three months later asked the local agent of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands to help him secure money still owed to him by the army. In 1872 he purchased more than an acre of his father's property and built a two-story brick house for his family, which included at least eight daughters and five sons among their thirteen children. Like his father, Taylor advocated civil rights for African Americans, but they disagreed on the best means of accomplishing their goals. As required by the Reconstruction Acts passed by Congress in 1867, Virginia had to rewrite its constitution before it could be readmitted to the United

States. At a Republican meeting held in Charlottesville on September 1, Taylor was nominated as one of the candidates to represent Albemarle County at a constitutional convention. Fairfax Taylor, however, opposed his nomination and publically refused to support his son because he thought that moderate white Republicans would be more effective in representing the interests of African Americans. Described as a radical, Taylor won election on October 22, 1867, as one of the county's two convention delegates. African Americans, voting for the first time in Virginia, overwhelmingly supported him and white radical C. L. Thompson and elected them by a margin of about three hundred votes out of approximately 4,000 cast.

At the convention, which began on December 3, 1867, Taylor was named to the thirteen-member committee that organized the business of the convention by identifying the numbers and duties of the standing committees. He sat on the Committees on the Basis of Representation and Apportionment and on Prisons and the Prevention and Punishment of Crime. Taylor spoke occasionally on the convention floor and offered an unsuccessful resolution calling for a law to allow former slaves to sue for wages owed them for any work they did for their former owners after the end of the Civil War. He generally sided with the Radicals in the convention, including an unsuccessful vote to require integrated public schools. On April 17, 1868, he voted with the majority to approve the new constitution, which provided for universal manhood suffrage, the establishment of a statewide public school system, and the democratization of local government.

At a meeting in March 1869, Republicans nominated Taylor as a candidate for the House of Delegates. At the election on July 6, when voters approved the new constitution, Taylor received only 43 percent of the vote and was defeated. He participated in Republican Party politics during the 1870s and

attended local and state conventions. In 1875 he joined another African American and a white man on a Republican ticket for Albemarle County's three seats in the House of Delegates. They lost the tight race and Taylor finished 105 votes behind the third place candidate. By 1881 he supported the Readjuster Party, a biracial coalition that sought to reduce and refinance payments on the state's crippling public debt to fund public education and other services. As a poll worker for Readjuster John Sergeant Wise, Taylor was accused of helping ineligible voters cast ballots during the 1882 congressional

election. He continued his political activity as a Republican into the twentieth century and remained a prominent member of his community. When Virginia enacted a new constitution in 1902 that severely restricted the voting rights of African Americans, Taylor was one of the few black men in his neighborhood who was able to register as a voter.

James Thomas Sammons Taylor died of pneumonia at his home on January 4, 1918. He was buried in Oakwood Cemetery, in Charlottesville.

Contributed by Christopher T. Brooks for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, a publication of the Library of Virginia.

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