

George Teamoh (1818–d. after 1887), member of the Convention of 1867–1868 and of the Senate of Virginia, was born enslaved in Norfolk. His parents, David and Lavinia, or Winnie, last names unknown, died when he was a young child. He and the Thomas family that owned him moved to Portsmouth about 1828. He developed a strong bond with family matriarch Jane Thomas. When Teamoh was about twelve, he was hired out to another family, where he was treated roughly. In 1832 while working in a brickyard he taught himself to read by listening to white children singing the alphabet in school and identifying words on handbills and posters. His clandestine attempts at literacy were curtailed when the yard's brickmason discovered the used primer that Teamoh had found. From about 1833 until 1853 he was hired out for a series of jobs but worked mostly around the city's shipyards as a ship's caulker and carpenter.

Teamoh unofficially married an enslaved woman named Sallie in 1841. They had at least one son and two daughters. The family that owned her attempted to sell her and their children in Richmond's slave markets in the summer of 1853. The ownership of the family being in doubt, the two older children were kidnapped and sold to parts unknown. Sallie Teamoh and their youngest daughter, Josephine, eventually ended up in the hands of a liquor salesman who sexually abused both women.

Jane Thomas arranged for Teamoh's escape from slavery the same year that his wife was sent to Richmond. She procured him a job as a carpenter on the Bremen-bound ship *Currituck*, believing that when it was at sea he would no longer be subject to the

Fugitive Slave Law. Teamoh ran away when the ship docked in New York City on its return to the United States. He moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, as winter approached and then settled in Boston a year and a half later. There he worked as a tailor and continued his education. After a brief, unhappy marriage that began on May 6, 1863, Teamoh returned to Portsmouth in 1865. He found his first wife, "emaciated, pale and almost speechless," living in a stable in Richmond.

Teamoh entered politics within weeks of his return to Virginia. He attended a state convention held by African Americans in Alexandria on August 2, 1865, but his experiences working on the docks focused him on workers' rights as well. He organized several civic actions during the next several years including a drive for equalizing the pay for white and black laborers at the Norfolk Navy Yard. In 1867 the main faction of the Portsmouth and Norfolk County Republican Party nominated him as one of its candidates for the state constitutional convention required by the Reconstruction Act passed by Congress that year. On October 22, 1867, when African American men voted in Virginia for the first time, Teamoh and two white Republicans won the district's three seats. Teamoh received the votes of seventy-four white men.

At the convention that met in Richmond from December 3, 1867, through April 17, 1868, Teamoh was a member of the dominant radical faction and served on the Committee on the Executive Department of Government and the Committee on Agricultural and Industrial Interests and Immigration. He introduced four resolutions. His proposal that debts created by transactions

involving enslaved workers since 1 January 1860 be forgiven was deemed a violation of the United States Constitution. Another proposed higher taxes on unused agricultural lands. The incomplete record of delegates' speeches includes none by Teamoh, but newspaper accounts indicate that he tired of the long bouts of rhetoric from Thomas Bayne, of Norfolk, and one alluded to a comment by Teamoh saying that he did not want to be a "bane" to the convention. He voted with the minority in favor of disfranchising white men who voted for prosecession delegates to the Convention of 1861. On April 17, 1868, he voted with the majority in favor of the new constitution that the state's electorate ratified in 1869.

The commanding general of the army in Virginia made notes on the delegates. Of Teamoh he wrote, "Was a slave in Norfolk Co. before the war but ran away and has returned to his old home. Has but little education. Some talent. *Radical.*" Teamoh later believed that the constitution was an opportunity lost and that the opposition press goaded African American delegates into reacting to their attacks rather than focusing on forming a constitution. Evidence suggests that some newspapers unnerved Teamoh as well. A few years later he wrote that some of his fellow Republicans ignored the desires of their constituents and were so greedy after the convention disbanded that they set Virginia up for political and economic failure in the future.

Three weeks after the convention adjourned, Teamoh attended a Republican state convention and was one of its vice presidents. He was selected as a delegate to that summer's Republican national convention, but the meeting's official proceedings did not

list him as a member. In March 1869 Teamoh served as one of the secretaries at the party's state convention. Voters in Norfolk County and Portsmouth elected him to the Senate of Virginia on July 6 of that year. Teamoh won easily with 3,527 votes of 5,685 cast, and improved his performance among white voters, receiving at least 291 votes.

His term in the state senate proved to be another disappointment. The Conservative Party held a majority of the seats, and he later concluded that the African American senators were powerless against the coalition of Conservatives and moderate Republicans. At a short session that met in October 1869, Teamoh 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, Teamoh sat on the Committee on Federal Relations. In 1870 the General Assembly approved a bill creating the state's first public school system. Fighting to secure their equal rights of citizenship, Teamoh and most of the African American senators 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.

In January 1871 Teamoh spoke in favor of an unsuccessful bill to outlaw whipping, describing it as a punishment only for the poor and one that left people who committed petty crimes vengeful. The following month, the assembly considered a controversial bill involving the Pennsylvania Railroad Company and efforts to construct a direct rail line from

Washington, D.C., to Richmond. Teamoh's constituents feared the effects of such a line on trade in Portsmouth and Norfolk, and he voted against the bill when it failed in the Senate on February 21, 1871, and again when it was reconsidered and passed two days later. He expressed his reservations about the bill in a letter published in the *Norfolk Virginian* and other state newspapers, and later stated that he refused a substantial bribe from an agent of the Pennsylvania Railroad. His support for his community and possibly his resistance to the payoff led the *Petersburg Index* on March 18, 1871, to praise Teamoh's integrity. That same day, Teamoh joined the majority of Republicans and many Conservatives when he voted for a bill that provided for the payment of the antebellum state debt, then totaling more than \$47 million. The Funding Act proved disastrous and was later regarded as one of the state's most ill-advised pieces of economic legislation.

Infighting about patronage and racial issues fractured the Republican Party in Portsmouth, ending Teamoh's career in the General Assembly. Late in April 1871 he came into conflict with the party's executive committee, and in October he lost the state senate nomination to a white man. A breakaway faction of Republicans selected him as its candidate for the House of Delegates. Teamoh finished second in the ensuing election but ahead of the official party candidate. His career in public life began to fade. On New Year's Day in 1873 he gave a speech honoring the tenth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In August 1875 he joined about a hundred other African American men who met in Richmond to address the lack of

employment available in the state and organized the short-lived Laboring Men's Mechanics' Union Association.

About 1870 Teamoh may have fathered a second son. Local tax records from 1872 indicate that Teamoh owned property in Portsmouth, and he arranged for the purchase of an adjacent lot and building that became a public school for the city's black students. He continued working as a caulker, but by the decade's end he complained that he was being shut out from work at the Navy Yard. Teamoh wrote his memoirs, which he largely completed in 1874. It is the principal source for the events of his life and preserves his increasingly critical comments about his former political colleagues. In 1883 he added to it an embittered addendum.

Teamoh's name appears in Portsmouth's personal property tax records for the last time in 1887. There is a strong likelihood that he lived in Elizabeth City County in the 1890s. Property records and city directories indicate that a man named George Teamoh lived with a woman named Josephine Teamoh, possibly his daughter, in the locality from 1890 to 1900. A *Richmond Planet* article from December 30, 1899, stated that Teamoh was then living in Phoebus. A later historian reported that he moved to Hampton. The county adjoined the two towns, and the discrepancies are not major. On the other hand, a woman named Sarah Teamoh, who might have been his wife, Sallie, was identified as a widow when she died in Elizabeth City County in 1892, although that easily could have been a mistake. The date and place of George Teamoh's death and burial are not known. His autobiography, *God Made Man, Man Made the Slave*, was published in 1990.

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

Sources Consulted

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