

“AFRICAN AMERICAN LEGISLATORS PROJECT”

African Americans in the Virginia General Assembly, 1871-1872



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With the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, tens of thousands of enslaved African men, women, and children in the “Southern states and territories in rebellion against the United States government” were set free from the degradation of human slavery. The abolition of slavery and the end of the American Civil War on April 18, 1865, resulted in life-altering changes and challenges in former slave states, including the right to vote for African American men. As a condition of readmission into the Union, former slave states were required by Congress to create reconstructed governments, hold state conventions, and establish new constitutions. In Virginia, African American men were given the right to vote for and to be elected delegates to the state convention; 25 African American men were elected to the 1867-1868 Virginia Constitutional Convention, that created the Virginia Constitution of 1869 (“the Underwood Constitution”) which, among other things, established the first public school system and extended the right to vote to African Americans in Virginia. During the era of Reconstruction, according to Virginia Memory, a historical database of the Library of Virginia, “105,832 freedmen registered to vote in Virginia, and 93,145 voted in the election that began on October 22, 1867.”

About 100 former enslaved African men served in the General Assembly of Virginia between 1869 and 1890 until subsequent state constitutions, the “Black Codes,” and Jim

Crow laws stripped away the franchise for African Americans. However, as a result of legislation enacted across the South to circumvent and thwart the newfound freedoms of former slaves, Congress enacted the Reconstruction Amendments to the United States Constitution, specifically the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment, which protects the rights of citizenship of freed men and women; and the Fifteenth Amendment, which prohibits states from denying citizens the right to vote due to race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Although the Reconstruction Amendments laid the foundation by which many former enslaved Africans and their descendants were afforded equal rights as citizens under the United States Constitution, including the right to vote and run for elected public office, very few African Americans dared to brave the political and social realities of the time to run for public office.

In Virginia, from 1890 to 1968, African Americans were not represented in the Virginia General Assembly, the oldest continuous legislative body in the Western Hemisphere, until William Ferguson Reid, a Richmond physician and community leader, in 1967, became the first African American in the 20th Century elected to the Virginia House of Delegates.