

**DEMOCRACY DEFERRED:  
LOUDOUN COUNTY VOTING RIGHTS, 1865-1902**

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The Conservative (Democratic) Party took power in Loudoun immediately after the war and dominated County politics for decades. Most members of the party, including many enslavers, had been pro-secessionist and opposed racial equality after the war. During the first postwar election for local offices, historian Charles Poland writes, "Local politicians during October 1865 attempted to hurt each other's chances of winning the election by accusing each other of being in favor of Negro suffrage." [Poland, p. 239, original from *The Mirror*, 12 October 1865] For several years after the war, editorials and letters from white citizens supported exclusion of African Americans from the political process due to their alleged inferiority and lack of intelligence. [Poland, p. 239, original from *The Mirror*, 28 November 1866]

Nevertheless, even before ratification of the 15th Amendment, African Americans in Loudoun County voted for the first time in the state election of 1869, and most probably supported the Republican Party, which championed progressive causes, including equal rights for African Americans. But with the Conservative Democrats' strong hold at both the local and state level, Republicans in Virginia were marginalized well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

An 1869 edition of *The Washingtonian*, a Leesburg newspaper, listed the following statistics of registered voters:

Whites	3,336
Colored	1,200
Total	4,536

As local historian Wynne Saffer points out, "This statistic demonstrates that negro suffrage was a fact in Loudoun, but black voters were clearly in a minority and could not determine the outcome of any election divided on racial lines." [Saffer, p. 10]

African Americans from Loudoun County did not participate in Virginia's constitutional conventions in the 1860s, nor was an African American elected in Loudoun County to serve in the General Assembly. (Note: Nonetheless, William H. Ash, born into slavery in Loudoun, represented Nottoway and Amelia Counties in the General Assembly in 1887.) [Journey Through Time, p. 15] Instead, the representatives whom Loudoun County sent to the state constitutional conventions were white men from the Conservative Party. According to Saffer, the Conservative Party occasionally sought out African Americans to serve in office. In 1873, a Leesburg barber, J. Cook Nickens, was elected district constable. He served for one year. [Saffer, p. 20] No other African American served in political office in Loudoun until John W. Tolbert Jr. was elected to the Leesburg Town Council in 1976. [Essence, p. 59]

Despite lacking a place in the predominant political party, Loudoun's African Americans were active politically. Remarkably, considering challenges that their counterparts elsewhere in the South faced after Reconstruction, they appear to have voted without confrontation or challenges until Virginia's constitution was changed in 1902. In September 1876, for instance, they held meetings in Leesburg during which they discussed the history of slavery and criticized the Democratic (Conservative) party's policies as "detrimental to the welfare of the colored man." [Poland, pp. 274-275]

Loudoun's African Americans acknowledged that they were indebted to the Republican Party for their freedom and rights, but when they felt excluded from the local white Republican group, they formed the Invincible Republican Club of Leesburg in 1876. Their motto was "May God help us to be invincible." Ex-Confederates considered the Club to be a "menace to the white people." Sheetz, the editor of *The Mirror*, criticized the Club as ungrateful to the white community because they held their meetings in a chapel that had been mostly constructed by Democrats. [Poland pp. 274-275]

Perhaps the best description of African American life during this time period, describing both the progress that the community had witnessed and the challenges they still faced, can be found in the petition made to Judge James B. McCabe by the Delegates of the Mass Meeting in 1883 (see article below). In their own words, African Americans described with pride how diligently they had worked to establish communities, educate themselves and their children, and become a part of society with the same hopes and dreams and patriotism as white citizens of Loudoun County.

Even as their voice was muted, African Americans in Loudoun tried to work within the Republican Party to advance their interests. An article from an 1889 edition of the Washington newspaper, *The Leader*, covered the convention of the Colored Republicans of the Eighth Congressional District. They met for the purpose of electing two delegates to represent the district at the National Colored Convention in Washington, D.C. Representing Loudoun at the District convention were George H. Russ, Robert Jordan, and Isaiah Allen.

In addition to electing delegates, the convention passed four resolutions, including a recommendation to Republican President-elect Harrison to name William Mahone to a cabinet position. They endorsed Mahone for his "zealous advocacy of Republican principles, devotion to State interests, and the interest he displayed in advancing the rights of the Negro, politically and educationally." (George H. Russ was born into slavery at Oatlands ca. 1859. William Mahone was a civil engineer, railroad executive and a pro-secessionist who was a Confederate general during the war. He led the Readjuster Party in Virginia. One of the items supported by the party was education for African American children.)

In summary, African Americans in Loudoun appear to have voted without challenge until the changes to the state's constitution in 1902 significantly curtailed their voting rights. Until that time, they were not deprived of their right to vote, but they were certainly marginalized politically. Former pro-secessionists, Confederate supporters, and enslavers formed the Conservative party and regained local control immediately after war's end. Unlike African Americans elsewhere in Virginia, Loudoun's African Americans barely held local office (one man, for one year) and never

held state office. While the Conservative party had to accept that slavery had ended, it did not accept racial equality. The 1883 Mass Meeting petition shows that African Americans' right to serve on juries and as election judges was not enforced, even after the judge acknowledged their right to serve on a jury. As Wynne Saffer states, "A society that had treated negroes as property in 1860 was slow to accept them as equal citizens after the war. Acceptance as social equals was still being fought for by Loudoun's negroes in 1966." [Saffer, p. 1]

#### Sources

- *Journey Through Time: Events Affecting African Americans in Loudoun County, Virginia* by the Black History Committee of the FTBL.
- *Essence of a People* by the Black History Committee of the FTBL.
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- *Loudoun Votes: A Civil War Legacy* by Wynne Saffer.
- *From Frontier to Suburbia: Loudoun County, Virginia, One of America's Fastest Growing Counties* by Charles Poland.
- *The Year After: Selections from the Loudoun Democratic Mirror June 14, 1865-June 13, 1866* by Jerry Michael.
- *1882-1885 Through the Eyes of Three Country Newspapers* by Jerry Michael.
- *The Leader* newspaper, 1889, page number unknown. From the Edwin Washington Project. Copy in Kimball's files.
- *The Historic Murder Trial of George Crawford* by David Bradley.

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