Editor’s note: As we look ahead to next week's election, we’re taking a look back at another major election in our local and state history—the election in 1867 in which Black men were allowed to vote for the first time.

The following story—which is the first part of a two-part series—is a component of the Rockbridge Historical Society’s Local Black Histories, housed at RockbridgeHistory.org along with the transcription of all of Rockbridge’s “Qualified Colored Electors” newly assembled by local researcher, genealogist and RHS volunteer Larry Spurgeon. The stories are co-written by Spurgeon and RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson.

**They went first, here.**

Alexander and Anderson; Downing, Evans, Gilmer; Humbles, Moore, and Pleasants; Bannisters and Walkers; fathers, sons, and brothers; 10 Thompsons, a baker’s dozen of Jacksons. Even four different Rockbridge men named George Washington. All are names still familiar within local families of both African and European descent.

These surnames are merely a few drawn from the 952 local African-American men who went to the polls for the first time on Oct. 22, 1867, in Lexington and Rockbridge.

What follows is an accounting of that landmark election, and profiles of a few local residents who voted that day, two years after the end of the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery; and over two years still ahead of the passage of the 15th Amendment, constitutionally affirming “universal” male suffrage as the law of the land.

Among those names inscribed in the Library of Virginia’s ledgers, those noted as “Qualified Colored Electors” forged their own distinctly new link in the chains of democratic promise, in those critical if often contradictory decades of radical cultural change.

Compromises, counterpoints, and continuities would ensue, through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and calls for voting rights reform through the 20th century and still today. But these Virginia men of 1867, both Black and white, would help to shape the next stage of American understandings and negotiations of race, and citizenship.

Women, to be sure, would still have to wait for the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, 53 years more—and for many women of color, many more years.

The project we’ve undertaken here jointly emerges from two directions: from the pages of a little-known, understudied, and newly transcribed set of Rockbridge ledgers at the Library of Virginia, and through the Rockbridge Historical Society’s digital efforts to add to the RHS website a wider and more freely accessible range of primary source documents and data.

To complement the growing cache of articles, narratives, and images on RHS “Local Black Histories” portal, a team of local researchers and scholars has undertaken several projects that will add to the historical record in more legible and searchable forms: available to students, descendants, authors, and academics.

Building off the comprehensive work of earlier researchers on the Lexington and Rockbridge censuses of 1860 and 1870, these include a database registering free people of color living here before the Civil War (involving significant undercounts and unrecorded names), a genealogically tagged distribution of those people enrolled across Rockbridge; emerging discoveries involving local men who served in the United States Colored Troops, and insights from property-tax records, and church archives.

Some of these initiatives parallel or collaborate with related projects also underway with Historic Lexington Foundation, with a range of student organizations and coursework at Washington and Lee University, as well as the Lexington-Rockbridge Visitor Center, the Virginia Association of Museums, and the newly established Walker Program.

With recent funding support from Virginia Humanities and the Community Foundation of Rockbridge, Bath, and Alleghany, these archived and interpretive legacies are building on contributions and suggestions of RHS members, those newly energized by the issues, and the momentum of a volunteer corps that welcomes others to participate in these ongoing inquiries. To become involved, contact RHS@RockbridgeHistory.org.

When Congress Stepped In

President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was an important, iconic step on the long and troubled road to freedom and equal rights.

See Vote, page B2
Four delegate candidates were on the ballot by party and district, two of which were affiliated with Democrats of the era) and two Union Repub-
lics (heirs to the party of Lincoln). Rock-
bridge had not returned a Union candidate.

Four delegate candidates were on the ballot by party and district, two of which were affiliated with Democrats of the era) and two Union Repub-
lics (heirs to the party of Lincoln). Rock-
bridge did not return a Union candidate. How-
ever, Rockbridge was part of a distinct that also included both Beth and Highland counties, and the two Conservatives, William McLaughlin and Joseph May, were chosen to attend the December conventions in Richmond.

In the sequel to this article, we’ll return to the importance of Judge McLaughlin, not least for his vital role in the final resting place of many of the men listed here.

The new state convention was chaired by federal Judge John C. Underwood, an ardent Unionist who had attracted the interest of the Lincoln Administration and the Republican National Committee to serve on the commission that would grant the franchise to black men in the commonwealth (though votes were denied to all blacks, including those who had tried to vote for Peace or secession) and to the governors of ten Southern states to be used by blacks to register to vote. The document initially called for the disenfranchisement of some former Confederates, and the selection of black leaders, although by the time it was ratified in 1869, that provision had been eliminated.

Fifty years later, this election would be recast by an article in the Lexington Gazette, headlined “Another Speech which the Paper Reveals.” Curiously, the political nigh-
time character and constitutional change takes second billing to a series of ghost stories in the preceding column and a half, in-
cluding the century-old, mysterious haunting of the house of Dr. McChesney, in northern Rockbridge who registered, only 891 (just 42 per-
cent of the 2,116 white men in Rockbridge) attended the December convention in Richmond.

The 1867 registry of Lilburn Down-
ing (who worked in the VMI hospital be-
tween Virginia Memory, Virginia Untold” (http://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/aan/

In a follow-up article to this piece, we’ll provide more in-depth profiles of other local figures, businesses and institutions related to the 1867 election, and how this landmark Virginia election would be tied to the creation of the Education of Black History and the loss of the historic “Colored Cemetery” atop what was once known as “Freedom’s Hill.”

The results of the Rock-
bridge vote were detailed in the Richmond Dispatch, on November 1, 1867, and some 1,068 men (923 Blacks and 145 whites, voting for the white voters). But it was surely the election that was the most
turning down the street. It made of the elections in the preceding column and a half, in-
cluding the century-old, mysterious haunting of the house of Dr. McChesney, in northern Rockbridge who registered, only 891 (just 42 per-
cent of the 2,116 white men in Rockbridge) attended the December convention in Richmond.

The 1867 registry of Lilburn Downing (who worked in the VMI hospital between 1868 and 1871, after he was emancipated) heralds the future accomplishments of his recently opened in 1927 for Rockbridge’s African-
American students.

As a result, Congress enacted the First

Governing the children of 1867 elector

The article continued from page B1.

Military District, Virginia, an election was

The 1867 registry of Lilburn Downing (who worked in the VMI hospital between 1868 and 1871, after he was emancipated) heralds the future accomplishments of his recently opened in 1927 for Rockbridge’s African-
American students.

As a result, Congress enacted the First

The 1867 registry of Lilburn Downing (who worked in the VMI hospital between 1868 and 1871, after he was emancipated) heralds the future accomplishments of his recently opened in 1927 for Rockbridge’s African-
American students.