

'At an early hour the "freedmen" began to pour into town ... They had laid aside the 'shovel and the hoe/and were bent on a holiday to commemorate their elevation to the dignity of voters.' - Richmond Dispatch, 1867

Black Men Take the Ballot

A Look Back At The Landmark 1867 Vote In Rockbridge

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, Gilmore, 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.

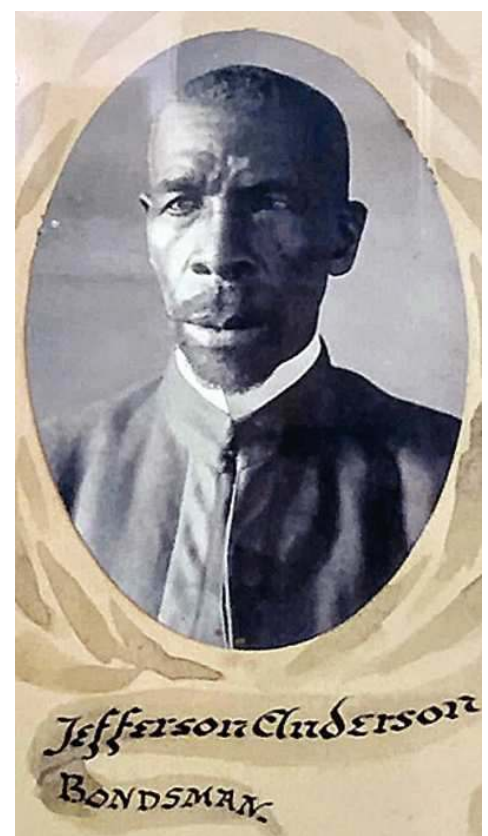
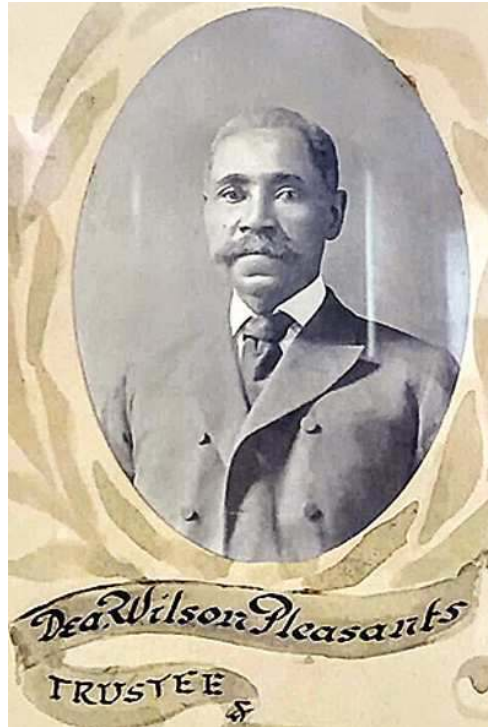
What follows is an accounting of that landmark election, and profiles of a few local residents who voted that day, two years after the end of the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, and over two years still ahead of the passage of the 15th Amendment, constitutionally 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 years of radical cultural change.

Compromises, counterpoints, and contingencies 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.

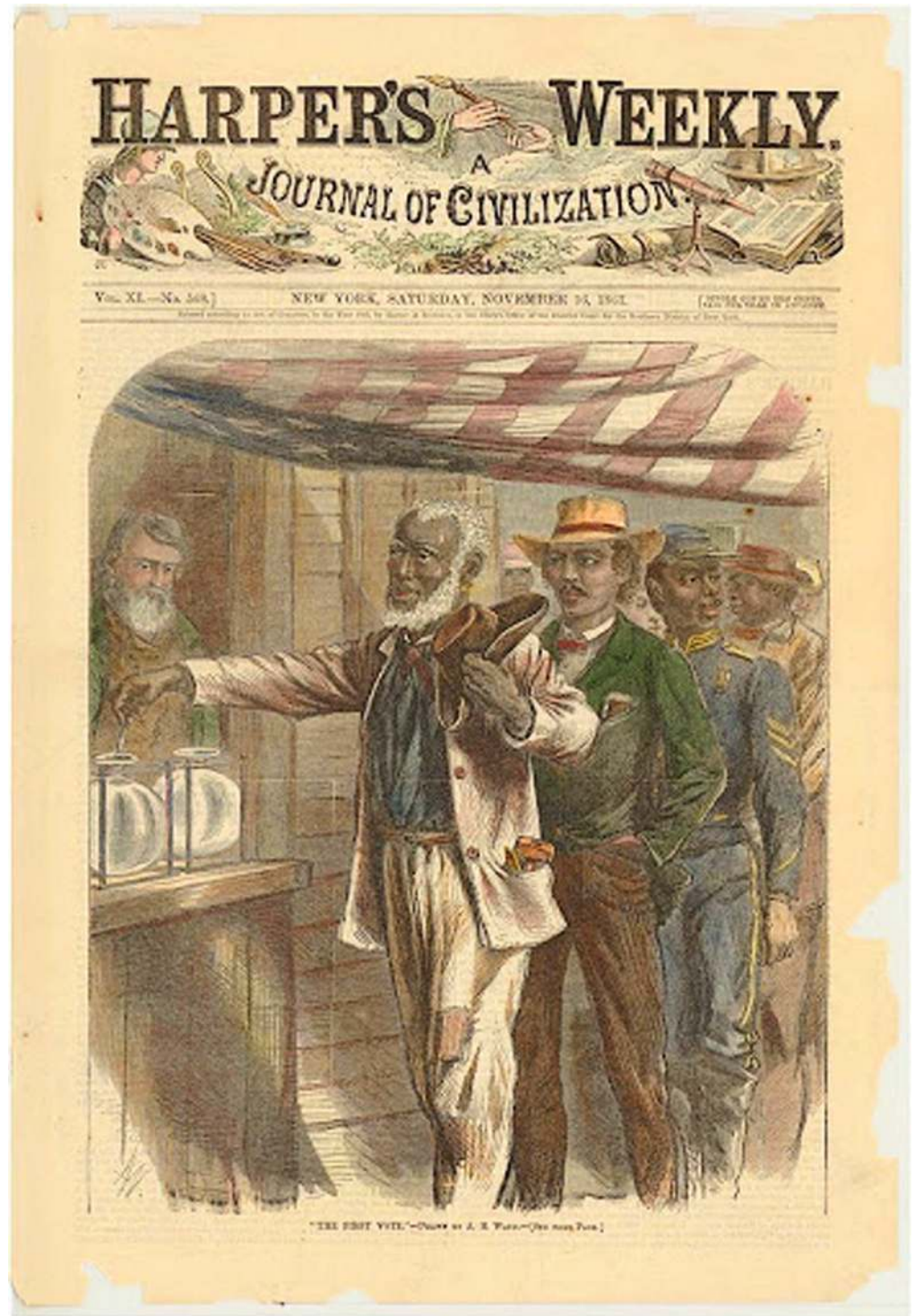
The project we've undertaken here jointly emerges from two directions: from the pages of a little-known, underutilized, and newly transcribed set of Rockbridge ledgers at the Library of Virginia, and through the Rockbridge Historical Society's digital efforts to add to the RHS website a wider and more freely acces-



sible 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



ABOVE, this cover of Harpers Weekly from Nov. 16, 1867, includes a drawing by Alfred Waud entitled "The First Vote," part of the magazine's coverage of the first voting by Black men that fall. AT LEFT are photographs of two local 1867 electors, pictured here (ca. 1905) in their leadership roles with Lexington's First Baptist Church. Only one generation after their inauguration of local Black male suffrage, deacon Wilson Pleasants and Jefferson Anderson stood among the leading church trustees and bondsmen who had helped not only finance but pay off the mortgage bonds of congregation's newly built brick church, celebrated in a 1905 composite kept in the church's sanctuary.

include a database registering free people of color living here before the Civil War (revealing significant undercounts and unrecorded names); a geo-tagged distribution of those people enslaved across Rockbridge; emerging discoveries involving local men who served in the United States Colored Troops, and insights from property-tax records, and church archives.

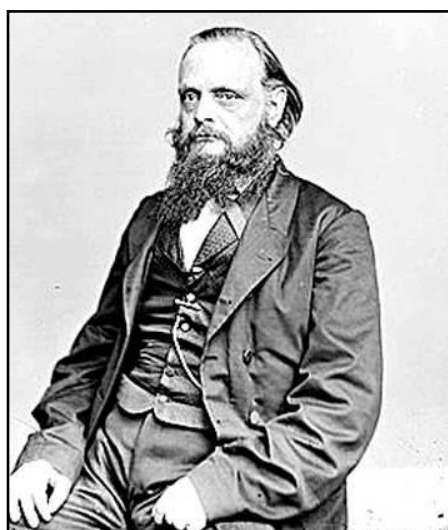
Some of these initiatives parallel or collaborate with related projects also underway with Historic Lexington Foundation, with a range of student organizations and coursework at Washington and Lee University, as well as the Lexington-Rockbridge Visitor Center, the Virginia Association of Museums, and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

With recent funding support from Virginia Humanities and the Community Foundation of Rockbridge, Bath, and Alleghany, these archival 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

See *Vote*, page B2

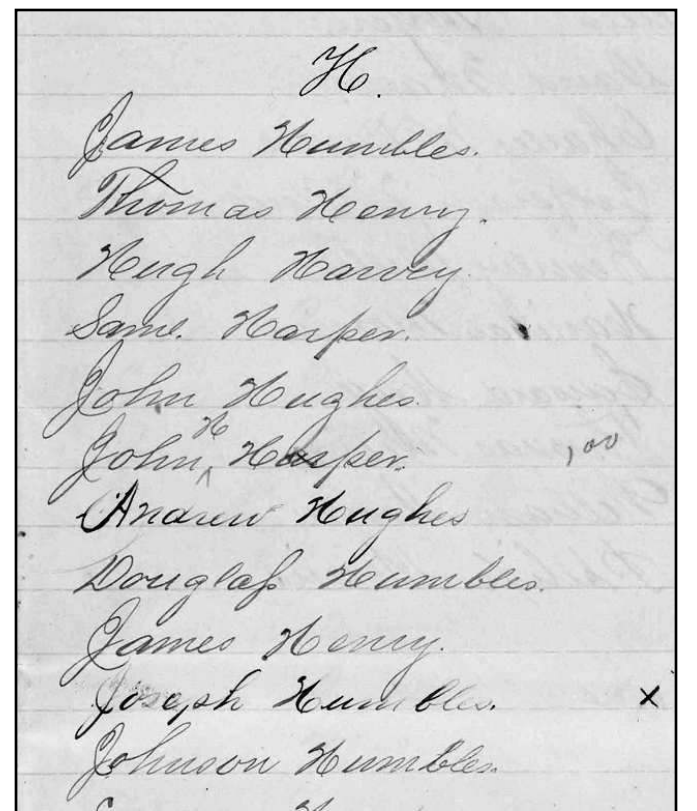


JOHN C. UNDERWOOD, chair of the 1868 Virginia Constitutional Convention, was a native New Yorker, abolitionist, and federal judge appointed by President Lincoln. He advocated that the new state constitution should not only extend black suffrage (it did), but also women's suffrage (it did not).

ROCKBRIDGE.			
	Whites.	Blacks.	Total.
For the Convention....	145	923	1,068
Against the Convention.	886	5	891
Delegates.			
G. A. Baker, Union republican.....	135	923	1,058
J. M. Sieg, Union rep..	125	923	1,048
W. McLaughlin, con've.	1,018	7	1,025
J. Mayse, conservative..	1,024	7	1,031

The election passed off peaceably. Not more than two-thirds of the registered voters of the county voted.

ABOVE are the 1867 voting returns for Rockbridge County, distinguishing Black and white votes for and against the new Constitutional Convention, and for the two delegates. With Bath and Alleghany also in this district, McLaughlin and Mayse were seated as Conservatives, despite slim Rockbridge majority for the Union Republicans. AT RIGHT is the 1867 list of "Qualified Colored Electors" for Rockbridge County, courtesy of the Library of Virginia.



Vote

continued from page B1

ity, a journey not yet completed. But it was a series of constitutional amendments, often known as the Reconstruction amendments, that abolished slavery and implemented the rights that come with citizenship.

The 13th Amendment, legally prohibiting "slavery [and] involuntary servitude," was ratified by the states in December 1865, nearly three full years after Lincoln's proclamation formally went into effect.

The 14th Amendment guaranteed citizenship to all people born in the United States, overturning the 1857 Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scott case, which held that Blacks were not "persons" under the Constitution. It also included rights for due process of law and equality. Congress approved the amendment in June 1866, but the state ratification process was grindingly slow.

As a result, Congress enacted the First Reconstruction Act in spring 1867 that made ratification of the 14th Amendment a condition to seating representatives from former Confederate states. The law also required those states to hold conventions that included Black representatives, to make new state constitutions. Not surprisingly, most white Virginians opposed these measures, and many refused to participate in the process.

In the absence of state government, military governance was imposed. In the First Military District, Virginia, an election was held on Oct. 22, 1867, to determine if a convention would take place, and if so, to select the delegates. Only men age 21 and above could vote, and county residency of at least a year was required. In most counties, separate ballot boxes were used — one for whites and one for Blacks — and separate poll books were maintained. Statewide, 93,145 free Black men — most of them recently emancipated — went to the polls to cast their first votes — an astonishing 88 percent of the 105,832 who'd registered as "Qualified Colored Electors."

The turnout among Rockbridge County freedmen was even higher. According to the Richmond Dispatch, the official registration of Black voters in the county by September was 1,043. Digitized images of the Poll Book for Rockbridge County, organized by the seven districts for the county and alphabetically subdivided within, can be found in full on the Library of Virginia website, under "Virginia Memory, Virginia Untold" (<http://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/aan/search-the-narrative>).

On Oct. 26, the Dispatch reported that 928 Blacks voted in Rockbridge County, a slight undercount of the 952 hand-written into the ledger, for a voter return of over 91 percent. By contrast, of the 2,116 white men in Rockbridge who registered, only 891 (just 42 percent) cast their votes. Some restrictions on those who'd held high rank or public office in the Confederacy would have tempered overall white registration slightly; though the lower yield of actual voters among that eligible pool would have resulted from other conditions or motivations.

A newspaper correspondent from Richmond reported what he witnessed in Lexington on that historic election day in late October 1867:

"The first thing that greeted the eyes of your correspondent this morning was the sight of a squad of United States soldiers marching down the street. It made an unpleasant impression at first, as it did not look like the free election which was promised. But it soon transpired that the 'blue coats' had come for the purpose of arresting an ex-rebel who recently whipped [up] a 'Loyal League' of some seventy members at Collierstown, in this county.

"At an early hour the 'freedmen' began to pour into town, and during the whole day the streets were crowded with them. They had laid aside the 'shovel and the hoe' and were bent on a holiday to commemorate their elevation to the dignity of voters. But it is proper to say that they were quiet and orderly."

The results of the Rockbridge vote were detailed in the Richmond Dispatch. 1,068 men (923 Blacks and 145 whites, voted for the convention), with 891 voting against, all but five of them white voters.

Four delegate candidates were on the ballot: two Conservatives (a party that roughly aligned with Democrats of the era) and two Union Republicans (heirs to the party of Lincoln). Rockbridge voters narrowly preferred the Union candidates. However, Rockbridge was part of a district that also included Bath and Highland counties, and the two Conservatives, William McLaughlin and Joseph Mayse, were chosen to attend the December convention in Richmond. [In the sequel to this article, we'll return to the importance of Judge McLaughlin, not least for his vital tie to the final resting places of many of the men listed here.]

The new state convention was chaired by federal Judge John C. Underwood, an ardent abolitionist, originally from New York, who became one of the first Republicans in Virginia. The "Underwood Constitution" would grant the franchise to black men in the commonwealth (though votes were denied to all women, despite his advocacy for female suffrage). The document initially called for the disenfranchisement of some former Confederate leaders, although by the time it was ratified in 1869, that provision was eliminated.

Fifty-eight years later, this election would be recalled by an article in the Lexington Gazette, headed "Another Spector which the Paper Reveals." Curiously, the political nightmare of electoral and constitutional change takes second billing to a series of ghost stories in the preceding column and a half, including the century-old, mysterious stonings of the house of Dr. McChesney, in northern Rockbridge near Moffatts Creek in 1825. Together, the pair of articles reveal how fiction and nonfiction play off one another, when narratives of the past ghost the present.

But to take the 1925 article more seriously, its framing identification of a "Spector" illustrates how the challenges of 1867 still hovered two generations later, still haunted somehow by the different turns and evolutions of the past. In the nearly 60 years between the vote and this calculated retrospective, the failures of Reconstruction had variously given way to new Black Codes, the growth of the Lost Cause narratives — this 1925 editorial among them — and Jim Crow. In counterpoint, these different primary sources, and the present purposes we make of them, stand as reminder that what may rightly be seen as a sort of promising dawn — for individual lives, for biography and history — does not always remain cheery and sunlit.

A Who's Who Of Leaders

This article began with a chorus of names, names of people important in their own time but whose descendents would also play major roles in the area.

The 1867 registry of Lilburn Downing (who worked in the VMI hospital before and after he was emancipated) heralds the future accomplishments of his recently born son (1863), the Rev. Lylburn Liggins Downing. The younger Lylburn would later become a noted preacher, educational leader, and namesake to the larger brick school that opened in 1927 for Rockbridge's African-American students.

John Styles, formerly enslaved by Col. John Jordan, would become, two years later

in 1869, father to the popular vernacular poet and mechanic Spotswood Styles.

Wilson Pleasants, pictured with this story as a deacon as one of First Baptist Church's leading members in 1905, would be father and grandfather to two warmly remembered physicians serving this community across the arc of the 20th century. Wilson's son, Dr. Alfred W. Pleasants Sr., would be among the early Lexingtonians to attend Hampton University. And he would pass on the professional baton, in turn, to his own son, Dr. Alfred W. Pleasants Jr. Their house at 214 Massie St. is familiar to many still here today who received their care there, or the South Jefferson Street office.

Among the children of 1867 elector Thornton Bannister was Eliza Bannister Walker, who would marry the prosperous entrepreneur Harry Lee Walker, and was herself a noted singer and poet, trained as a nurse in Washington, D.C., returning to become a leader at First Baptist, and a social activist advocating for African-American social and political concerns at the local, state, and national levels.

In a follow-up article to this piece, we will 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 Evergreen Cemetery and the loss of the historic "Colored Cemetery" atop what was once known as "Freedmen's Hill."

Another Spector Which the Paper Reveals.

The editor's interest in this old copy of the Gazette and Banner was particularly aroused by something more acute than these ghost stories. It was a spector that hung over Virginia and the rest of the South. The date of the paper, it will be recalled, was Nov. 27, 1867, that is two years and a half after the Surrender at Appomattox. In the previous spring and winter a Radical congress at Washington had passed reconstruction legislation, taking from the Southern states the free government they had enjoyed after the war, and made of them military districts. In Virginia, General Schofield of the army ruled the commonwealth. Another provision of this reconstruction legislation had been put into effect. That was one giving the voting franchise to Negroes two years removed from slavery, while denying it to many white people; and authorizing this electorate to elect members of a constitutional convention to revise the constitution of Virginia. Members of that convention had been elected just a month before the date of the Gazette and Banner, that is in October, 1867. Then for the first time universal Negro suffrage prevailed in Virginia. The Radical party had at this election carried the convention by a large majority and about one-fourth of its membership was Negroes.

THIS LEXINGTON GAZETTE editorial from Oct. 22, 1925, written on the anniversary of the 1867 election, described it as a "Spector" or half-remembered ghost, that had changed the racial balance of electoral power and party politics in Rockbridge and Virginia.



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