

# 1867 Election Notables

## First Black Voters Included Successful Businessmen, Educators

*Editor's note: The following is the second part of a now three-part series, courtesy of the Rockbridge Historical Society, on the groundbreaking multi-racial election of 1867 and its various dimensions. This second part spotlights the lives of several individuals and their families. A third piece in coming weeks will focus on the two historic Black cemeteries that served the Lexington community through the next half century of political and cultural change. The stories are co-written by lawyer and genealogist Larry Spurgeon and RHS Executive Director Eric Wilson, and will be archived at RHS' Local Black Histories page at RockbridgeHistory.org.*

So the election happened, leaving Rockbridge to learn, in the decades ahead, what to make of it.

On Oct. 22, 1867, at least 923 Black men from Rockbridge voted for the first time, joining with 145 local white men in statewide approval to hold a new, racially integrated constitutional convention in Richmond. In all, published records show a multi-racial coalition of 1,068 voters for the convention, with 886 white and five black residents dissenting.

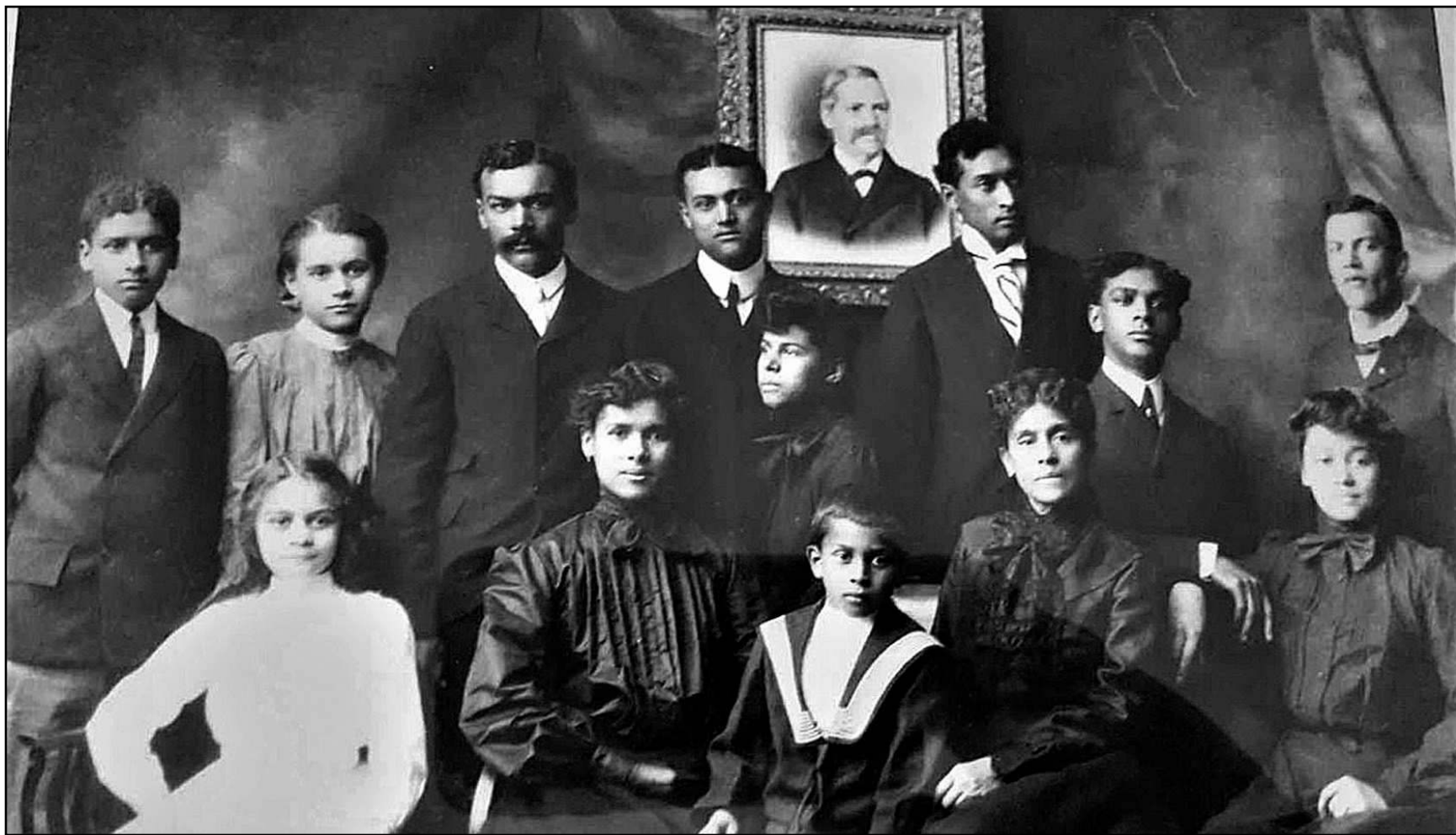
When the convention opened at the state capitol that December, 104 delegates were seated, each selected by regional districts: 36 Conservatives and 68 Republicans, 24 of whom were African-American.

In the broader work of building new post-Civil War communities, the convention's necessary task was to approve a state constitution and ratify the 14th Amendment for the state to hold seats in Congress. Eventually known by the name of the convention's chair, the new 'Underwood Constitution' would be ratified in 1869, after some final haggling.

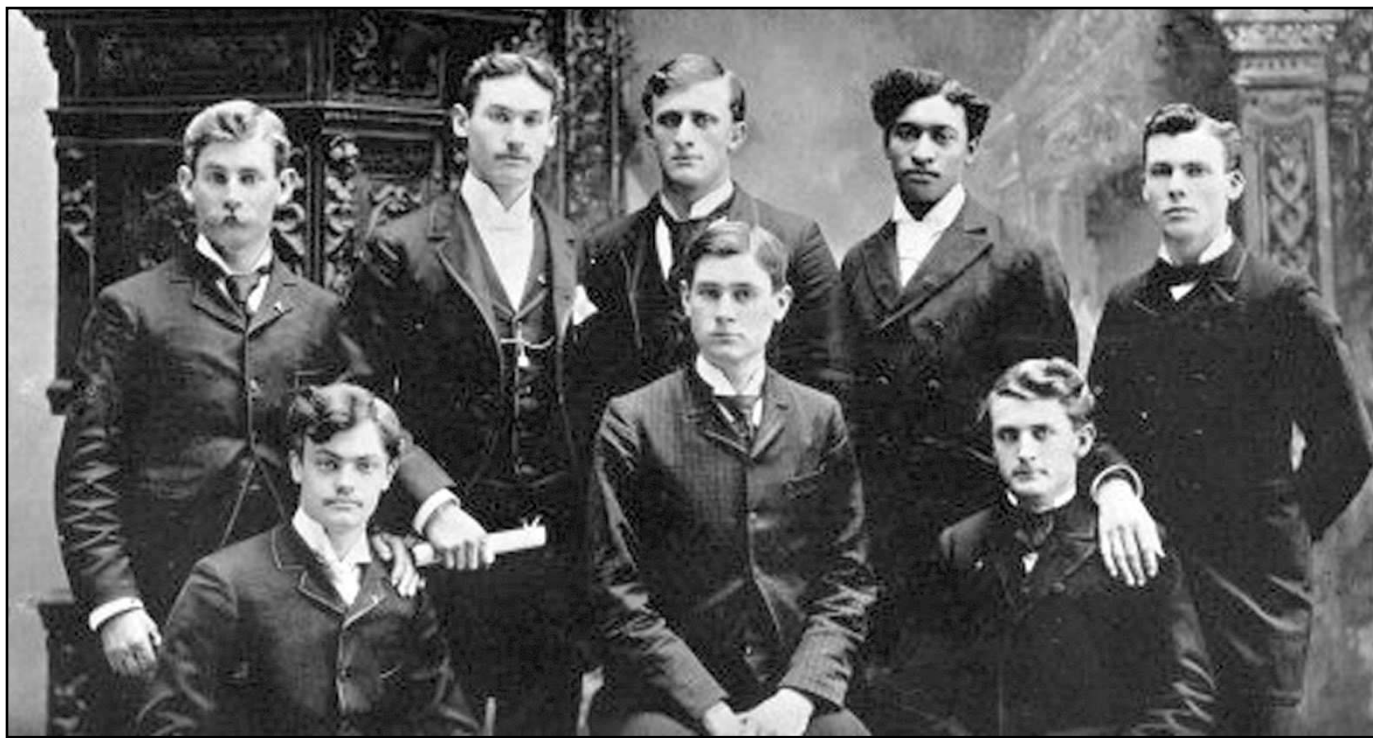
Among its achievements and compromises were the substantial extension of voting rights to Black male citizens, the refusal to extend that to women (despite Judge Underwood's advocacy), and the restoration of some political rights to former Confederate leaders.

Although Rockbridge voters had favored the ticket's two Union Republican candidates, the three-county district at large selected Lexington Judge William McLaughlin as one of the two Conservative Party delegates who would represent this area in Richmond. A decade later, McLaughlin's local land dealings would prove foundational to generations of local African American families, and a key piece in the puzzle of the city of Lexington's 175 years of cemetery ownership, across different sites, on different terms.

The previous article closed by briefly noting some of the notable sons and daughters of this "electoral class." The fathers of the Rev. Lylburn Downing, Spottwood Styles, Eliza Bannister Walker and Dr. A.W. Pleasants Sr. each registered in the local ledgers of "Qualified Colored Electors." Casting their first vote in that first integrated elec-



ALL 12 CHILDREN of Cornelia and William Washington likely gathered at the time of William's 1903 funeral for this photograph in Michael Miley's Lexington studio. Cornelia is seated in front (second from right); William may well be the subject of the portrait spotlighted on the back wall. William Lee Washington Jr. stands just below the portrait, in a white tie (back row, fifth from left). (courtesy of W&L Special Collections.)



WILLIAM LEE WASHINGTON JR. (back row, second from right) is shown with fellow classmates and contestants in Oberlin College's Acme Literary Society. His speech, "Educating the Laboring Class," won the annual oratory contest in 1894. Richmond and national newspapers noted that his 1897 speech about Frederick Douglass won the "highest honor ever won by any colored student in a northern institution."

tion, they helped set the stage for their children and grandchildren to have their own impact on Lexington, Rockbridge, and beyond.

Here, we dig more specifically into profiles of some of 1867's other groundbreaking Black voters, and the people and institutions they shaped.

### James Humbles

The emerging records of James Humbles' life not only help us see the changes he lived through, they also help us see the networks of 19th century Lexington in new complexities, too.

Like all of us, Humbles was complicated. Cast in what Walt Whitman called "this curious frame of human mould" (1842), he was curious, canny and connected - sometimes constrained by the past; sometimes complicit with the circumstances at hand.

Humbles was born in 1834 to John and Betsy Humbles, both free Black residents of Rockbridge. One of his many 1906 obituaries led with "James Humbles, a well-known and popular colored man of Lexington ... was credited with having considerable Indian blood in his veins, and his complexion,

manner and tall, spare, erect form indicated it."

Obituaries do their own interpretive work, and inevitably select their chosen facts. For Humbles, building his biography is both helped and complicated by the fact that dozens of his obituaries ran nationally, from both Lexington and Rockbridge papers, to Baltimore, Ft. Worth, Texas, even Alma, Kansas. There's a range of cues to draw from, and some unusual ones to reckon with.

Among the key points of note is that Humbles was born a "free man of colour." The RHS website contains a fuller accounting of Virginia laws and statistics regarding free Blacks, and a growing database identifying free Black residents and networks in Rockbridge (often overlooked in pre-Civil War histories, and systematically undercounted in period documents).

In the 1860 census, a full third of Lexington's 2,100 residents were Black: 600 of them enslaved, and 90 of them free. By comparison, 25 percent of the county's total population of 17,000 was Black.

Free Blacks in Virginia were legally able to own property and marry another free Black person, but unable to vote,

and deprived of most rights of state and national citizenship. The 1849 Code of Virginia covered "Free Negroes." The first provision stated that no Black adult emancipated since 1806 could "remain in this state more than one year without lawful permission." Permission could be granted if the "applicant produced satisfactory proof of his being of good character, sober, peaceable, orderly and industrious." A violation could lead to being forced back into slavery.

A free person was required to register every five years with the county, and a book was kept by the clerk of the court for that purpose. The local judge was required to approve or deny the registration in court. The registration records for Rockbridge County from 1803 through 1860 consist of more than 500 entries. Nearly three times that many free Blacks lived in the county during that span, demonstrating that the registration requirement was equently ignored, and, apparently, rarely enforced.

James Humbles' own registration entry witnesses this process (he would have been 22, in 1856), and also records some of his physical features

that signal this system of legal surveillance.

The 1850 Census notes Humbles as having been a servant to a white household at age 16. Farming, as for many of the era, seems to have been part of his work in the years that followed. More distinctively, he is noted as operating the Lexington Waterworks before the war. In 1857 and 1858, Washington College twice paid him for "repairing a hydrant" by the college spring.

It was his Civil War service that has drawn the most attention of writers of earlier eras and today, partly because of his evident outlier status on the war front. Different accounts affirm that, in some capacity or another, Humbles joined the Rockbridge Dragoons Cavalry in 1861, serving as a bugler. Some note that he carried a musket; another soldier recalled his killing a retreating Union soldier.

For whatever reasons James Humbles may have gone to war, his reasons for leaving the Army in 1863 are also not clear, returning to Lexington during the height of conflict and marrying Frances Brooks, whom he lived with before the war. One obituary from Alma, Kansas, states that after leaving the Army,



WILLIAM and Cornelia Washington are buried in Lexington's Evergreen Cemetery.

Humbles continued to travel to provide provisions to the front, whether to sustain his own needs, or to sustain the Confederacy.

At the age of 33, Humbles was the first voter to be enrolled in Lexington's 1867 Qualified Colored Elector roll, under the letter H. Described in those early post-war years as a merchant, by 1877 he operated a successful restaurant at the corner of Jefferson and Washington streets. His spirited advertisements in local newspapers also advertise his readiness to offer meals on demand and cater services: "Oysters! Ice Cream!! Good Deals for Students and Catering!!!"

In 1889, he remarried, this time to Evelyne Myers, herself a noted local restaurant operator, and subject of a glowing 1901 obituary after her widely attended funeral at First Baptist Church, on Main Street. For his part, Humbles served as a trustee at the Methodist Episcopal Church on Randolph Street, where he chaired the building committee, and also provided testimony about needed repairs at the Lexington Colored School next door.

The respect for his professional skill from Lexington's political and social leaders is remarked in the account of a remarkable event in 1896.

Hailed as "Lexington's

# Vote

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most prosperous colored citizen," Humbles catered a banquet for the local fire department, hosted by "the representative colored men of Lexington, the hosts being made up of property owners, business and professional men."

The fact that this report ran in Baltimore newspaper – as would his 1906 obituaries in dozens of cities around the country – tells about more than Humbles' accomplishments as a successful entrepreneur. It tells us how the world around Humbles wanted to see him – and was glad to see itself, through assuring white patronage in the more conservative turns of the late 19th century, at the time when the early goals of Reconstruction had given way to poll taxes, new Black Codes, a reactionary 1902 state constitution, and the formal and informal realignments of Jim Crow segregation, in and beyond Virginia.

This is not to say that Humbles' accord with his neighbors and local networks was not sincere, nor valuable to many. But it's worth noting, in this first generational cycle after the Civil War, how the echoes of racial amity are routinely affirmed with Humbles and other trusted "colored friends" – perhaps precisely because, or perhaps only because, of that uniform political alliance.

Like Evelyne Humbles' funeral, James' funeral was credited for being "widely attended by both black and white citizens," resonant with the repeated published eulogies that celebrated that he "always voted the Democratic ticket."

However James Humbles voting career may have evolved – his conservative politics noted frequently enough to warrant due credit – he did not always vote against the Republicans, much as the tidy tributes might try to tie off.

Rockbridge's 1867 Colored Elector Rolls are subtitled by seven districts. And in District No. 1/Lexington (where Humbles was registered), 100 percent of the Lexington voters cast their ballots for the Union Republican-aligned Convention. Already a free man, newly enfranchised, that ballot – and his vote for post-Civil War Reconstruction policies – is where James Humbles took his next start.

## William Washington

That same Lexington ballot box gave a new opportunity for William Washington, who followed a rather different path to the 1867 electoral rolls: freed by the 13th Amendment, rather than a free man born, like Humbles.

Washington was born in western (now West) Virginia, in Shepherdstown in 1847, enslaved in the family of Edmund Lee. Edmund was a first cousin of Robert E. Lee.

In his 1903 Lexington Gazette obituary, Washington was noted as being a wartime "servant of his young master, Gen. Edwin G. Lee" (son of Edmund), who had also attended Washington College.

It's not clear exactly when or how Washington arrived in Lexington after the war. But the Lee family connections seem a plausible factor, and the one-year residency requirements of the 1867 vote meant that William would have had to have arrived in Rockbridge by the fall of 1866, one year into the cultural resettlements after Appomattox.

During his early years in town, Washington worked as a baker at Virginia Military Institute, "where he was held in the highest esteem," according to that local obituary heralding

his funeral at R.E. Lee Memorial Episcopal Church. By the time of Washington's death, he was also "considered the wealthiest negro in Lexington." As his estate was being settled and sold, his farm on the southern edge of Lexington (off Houston Street, where the fairgrounds formerly lay) was praised for having the highest yield around.

In four decades after Emancipation, William Washington clearly began to direct his keen acumen, social savvy and rapidly accumulating capital into real estate acquisition and speculation. In the 1870s, he served as one of the community trustees of the recently established Freedmen's School (then serving about 150 students, and cresting its capacities). He was ritually noted as the only Black communicant at Grace Episcopal Church, that signal of religious allegiance with one of the town's leading institutions echoes with some of the chords that ground contemporary civic praise for Humbles' own political calculations.

Among the treasures in Washington and Lee's Special Collections archives, there is a remarkable portrait of the Washington family, all 12 children clustered around mother Cornelia. William's obituary notes that she was "house maid to the family of Gen. R.E. Lee" when they married. With many of those grown children now having moved around the nation – two of them having settled in Boston by then – it seems the occasion for this reunion would have been the funeral of William Sr. With the full family crowded into the studio of Michael Miley, that may well be the portrait of "Father Washington" centered in the back of the richly furnished room.

## William Washington Jr.

In the right of that picture, with the dandyish white tie, is the family's third child, William Lee Washington Jr. And to follow his remarkable story, even in short sketch, is to witness how broadly the opportunities open up (for some, if not all) of this first generation of Blacks born after the war.

William Jr. was born in 1872, five years after his father had voted for the state's constitutional convention and more progressive freedoms. He would leave Lexington to attend two pioneering colleges that welcomed Black students: Storer College (Harpers Ferry, W.Va.) and Oberlin College (Oberlin, Ohio), where he earned his bachelor of arts degree in 1900. Two other brothers also attended Oberlin's preparatory academy.

While at Oberlin, he distinguished himself as an athlete and prizewinning orator. Richmond and national newspapers noted that his 1897 speech about Frederick Douglass won the "highest honor ever won by any colored student in a northern institution."

Returning to Lexington after graduation, William Jr. began teaching at Lexington's colored school and was soon named its principal. In 1905, he married Blanche Evans in Buena Vista. That same year, when Lexington's First Baptist Church celebrated the retirement of the debt on its grand new building, with the ritual burning of its mortgage notes, Rev. W.L. Lee was invited to be the keynote speaker.

In time, he would earn a divinity degree from what is now Virginia Union. Moving to Washington, D.C., he preached at the historic Zion Baptist Church (est. 1867), taught English at a seminary,

**Death of William Washington**  
 William Washington, a worthy colored man of Lexington, died at his home here yesterday, after several weeks' illness, aged 56 years. He was born a slave in the family of Mr. Edmund I. Lee at Shepherdstown, now in West Virginia. During the latter part of the Civil War he was the servant of his young master, Gen. Edwin G. Lee. After the war he came to Lexington and for over a quarter of a century was baker at the Virginia Military Institute, where he was held in the highest esteem. By good management he amassed considerable property and was considered the wealthiest negro in Lexington. He was a member of R. E. Lee Memorial Episcopal church, the only colored communicant of that church. His wife was Cornelia Scott, who at the time of her marriage was house maid in the family of Gen. R. E. Lee. She survives with twelve children, six boys and six girls, all of whom are highly respected.

ABOVE is the Lexington Gazette obituary for William Washington, born enslaved in 1847 in what is now West Virginia and who died in 1903. BELOW, this story in the May 16, 1902, issue of the Lexington Gazette notes that William Washington Jr. is reelected principal of Lexington's Graded Colored School on South Randolph Street.

The following teachers were elected for the colored schools: William Washington, Jr. re-elected principal, with Charles S. Harper, Henrietta C. Evans, and Nannie Clay as teachers. The principal, William Washington, Jr., served acceptably in that capacity the latter part of last session, filling out the term of Isaiah Bowen. He is a graduate of Oberlin College, Ohio. Charles S. Harper, the new teacher, is a native of Lexington, but has recently been in Philadelphia. He is a graduate of Lincoln College, and also of the normal department of Morgan College, Baltimore. The other two teachers have been in the school for some years.

and taught religion at Howard University.

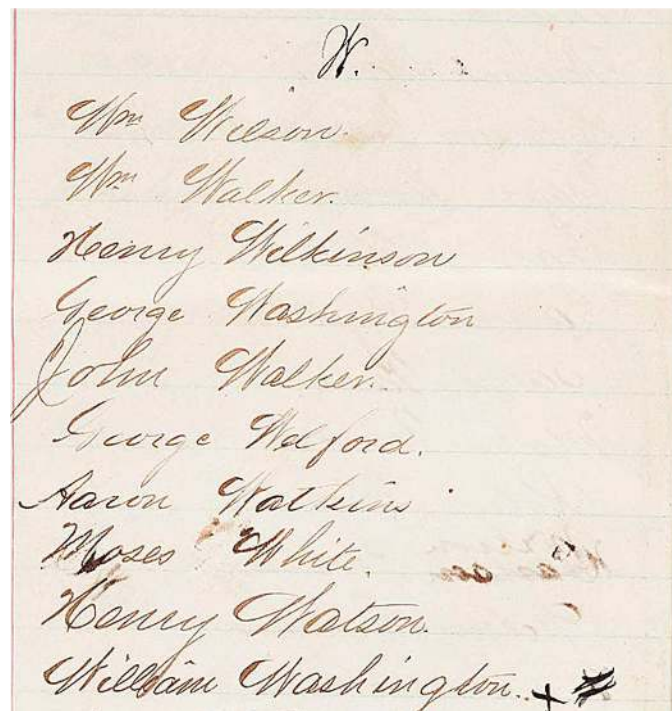
Having remarried in Washington in 1918, his wife Sadie worked with him as he was appointed the head of a remarkable new institution, "The Colored Social Settlement of Washington, D.C." Like YMCAs of the era, this Washington center served as a social, economic, cultural support resource, network and school. One of its noted board members was fellow Oberlin alumna Mary Church Terrell, a celebrated activist and key leader in the push for Black women's suffrage, even after passage of 19th Amendment.

Rev. Washington's skills in language and leadership contributed to a growing stream of Lexington-Rockbridge residents in that era, who shuttled to and back from the nation's capital.

Another local contemporary whose family worked and worshipped in similar Lexington circuits, Eliza Bannister Walker trained as a nurse around this time, in Washington, launching her nationwide fundraising campaign for "The Lexington Orphanage and Old Folks Home," through nationally backed advertisements in The Washington Eagle.

erations fan out into the 20th century, we see other paths to be more independently established here, and stakes claimed, beyond.

It's important to be rightly respectful and not too rosy about such successes. In the long and shifting shadows of racial prejudice and accommodation, violence and new victories, achievements and uneasy freedoms for many were tempered by limits and loss for others.



THE NAME of William Washington appears in the 1867 poll-books listing Rockbridge County's "Qualified Colored Electors." A searchable spreadsheet of the nearly 1,000 Black male voters from Lexington and Rockbridge is accessible at RockbridgeHistory.org.

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