‘Bulldozing’ And Disenfranchising
How Voting Rights Were Taken Away From Blacks

For a window of nearly two decades, Virginia negotiated the arrival of a generation of multiracial male voters, politically influential church associations, newspapers and fraternal orders, and even Black delegates elected to the General Assembly ...
Vote

continued from page 81 “compromise” between rival conservative groups, “to share the emoluments of office.” This would both allow the vigilante “Republicans … to return to their fields, working their corn,” and spare them “necessity … of bulldoz[ing] the other faction … and that class of voters [who are] dangerous, and cannot be depended on to maintain good government.”

Coupled with this portrait of contemporary electoral tactics is another eye-catching item, seemingly conjured with this story. It notes that the voters’ patronymical term — an office of political patronage then — was offered to, but declined by “Mrs. Stonewall Jackson.” Later “Mind you, this is an article in The Weekly Messenger of Martinville, Virginia, in the middle of the Civil War, published on the 25th of May, 1862.”

In the sweeping reversals generally known as “Redemption,” the newly restored conservative establishments in all 11 former Confederate states re-wrote their Constitutions between 1865 and 1876, Virginia in 1870. And as Ed Ayers has noted in “Compromise” (see RYCHE: YouTube channel, Virginia would come to figure as one of the lowest voter participation rates in the entire country by the 1920s, at 20 percent. Put another way: what’s the point of voting, for anyone, if the game’s already decided?

The 1902 Virginia Constitution: Virginia’s 1902 Constitution was drawn through the state’s ascendant Democrats, paralleling other restorations of the era. Local and state electoral qualifications largely displaced the state’s “grandfather clause.” Another phrase that originated in this era.

In May of 1902, one month after the Constitution’s final approval, the Lexington Gazette weighed in on the stakes at hand, and how things had come to pass: “How to get rid of the negro vote and eliminate him from politics has seriously troubled the minds of many of the convention. The disfranchisement of the negro at the time he became a voter was a crime, but we did not commit it” (i.e., Congress did that in 1867, not us).

But with the new legislature in place — “No White Man to Lose His Vote, in Virginia” heralds a 1903 broadside from the state chairman — the core concern now centered not on one, but on popular sovereignty. Worryingly, the approved Constitution would not be presented to the people themselves, as had been done by Republican leadership in 1869. The right of the people to approve or disapprove the work of their servants is undeniable, and the people cannot see how 100 men have the power to say that the people shall take the new Constitution whether they want it or not, and that certain people shall vote on it, and certain people shall not. This is tyranny.

The tyranny figured here is no longer the United States Constitution and congressional law. The tyranny is that the people of Virginia however defined — decent people of any state, we assume — were prohibited from having additional rights, and that “Black America’s first superhero,” in Gates’ own recent, colorful re-telling, indeed Rockbridge would enjoy in our own share of landord, and heroism, anchored among African Americans, locally and nationally. And yet, as historian Harry Louis Gates Jr. has noted, “some of the very stage from which Black comm.

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