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RICHMOND AND VIRGINIA IN THE 1867 ELECTION
FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

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HISTORY H392

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PREFACE

The purpose of this paper is to present the reaction of Richmond's conservative white newspapers to the election in October 1867 for a constitutional convention. The three papers include the overtly racist Enquirer, the moderate Whig, and the Dispatch, which claimed a larger circulation than the other papers combined. All three newspapers, however, considered the Negro to be inferior and feared radical reconstruction as the ultimate disaster for Virginia. The press unanimously favored maintaining white supremacy and editorialized for the organization of conservative white opposition to the radical party in the October election.

Because the paper deals with political factions, some clarification of terms might be helpful. The Republican party constituted the only political organization on a statewide basis in Virginia in 1867. The radical elements in the party became dominant early in the year and, as moderates failed to temper the party's extremism, "radical" and "Republican" became synonymous in Virginia.

Although no real party other than the Republican party existed during the 1867 election campaign, conservative white Virginians did form local slates of candidates. These opposition tickets contained men from varied political backgrounds and are

most accurately described as simply "conservative." Because the radicals commanded solid loyalty from Virginia blacks and, on the other hand, because the conservatives offered little attraction for the freedmen, the two opposing factions in the election were supported on an almost strictly racial basis. Thus the radical Republican group became "the party of the freedmen" and the conservative tickets, in effect, were white men's parties.

RICHMOND AND VIRGINIA IN THE 1867 ELECTION
FOR A CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Two years after the end of the civil war, Virginia took the first step toward regaining full statehood with the election in October 1867 for a constitutional convention. Called in accordance with the reconstruction legislation of Congress, this election began the process of establishing a loyal union government in the state. The election also demonstrated the primacy of the racial question in Virginia politics and led to the formation of a white supremacist, Democratic party to counter radical Republican control of the freedmen.

Congress, in March of 1867, ended presidential reconstruction and Virginia became military district Number One. General J. M. Schofield replaced Governor Francis H. Pierpont, whose regime had been recognized by President Johnson as the legitimate government of Virginia. As required by law, General Schofield conducted a registration of voters in preparation for an election on October 22, 1867. Serving a dual purpose, the election would ask the voters if they wanted a constitutional convention and would also provide for the selection of delegates to it. The electorate included all males of both races over twenty-one but excluded all who had held national or state offices before the war and later aided the Confederacy.¹ Out

of a total registration of 225,933 there was a white majority of 14,269.² The heavy concentration of Negroes in the most populous counties of eastern and southern Virginia, however, produced a black majority in 59 of the state's 105 electoral districts.³

The announcement of the election created growing political excitement in Virginia during the summer of 1867. A small group of white radical Republicans, native and out-of-state, successfully organized the newly enfranchised freedmen to support their cause. Led by James W. Hunnicutt, the party's April convention adopted a program emphasizing equality of races and total submission to Congressional reconstruction.⁴

Moderate white Republicans like Pierpont, who remained as a figurehead governor under General Schofield, feared that Hunnicutt's program would produce a conservative reaction and result in a white man's Democratic party.⁵ These moderates, called "co-operators" because they worked within the radical Republican party, attempted to outmaneuver Hunnicutt by creating a less extreme organization palatable to both Negroes and conservative whites.⁶

The first effort of the "co-operators", centering in Petersburg, failed because it remained both too liberal for most of Virginia's conservative white electorate and too conservative for the organized freedmen. Another "co-operation" movement called for a new Republican convention at Charlottesville on July 4. When this move threatened to split the Republicans into hostile factions, Northern party members came to

Virginia to serve as mediators. In a compromise agreement, the moderates dropped their proposed Charlottesville convention and consented to a joint meeting with the radicals in Richmond on August 1.⁷

In the month preceding the August convention, the "co-operation" movement gained support. Its adherents, including the editors of the Richmond Whig, realistically accepted Congressional reconstruction as the basis for restoring Virginia to the Union. Hunnicutt, however, dominated the August meeting just as in April. The moderate delegates, led by John Minor Botts, were prevented from even entering the meeting hall. Radical Republicanism triumphant, "co-operation" quickly faded and hence confirmed Negro allegiance to Hunnicutt's faction.⁸

After the August convention, radical Republicans formed the only coherent political group in the state. Conservative white Virginians saw that unless they organized an effective opposition, Hunnicutt's group would control the constitutional convention by default. Richmond editors voiced a growing fear of radical and Negro domination:

The recent hideous Radical carnival in this city, like a fire-bell at midnight, should arouse every honest white man in Virginia to a sense of danger to his State, his race, and his wife and children. He must now see that unless intimidated by the superior strength of the white man, the negro will soon demand social equality and seize upon the government and offices of the State.⁹

Gradually the whites did nominate candidates in opposition to the radicals and thus the campaign started. It proceeded vigorously to attract both radicals and conservatives to their respective slates of candidates and to register for the October election.¹⁰

As the campaign moved into the final month of October, Richmond's newspapers devoted increasing attention to political matters. The three standard, conservative papers, the Enquirer, the Dispatch, and the Whig, editorially denounced the radical ticket while encouraging the nomination and support of conservative delegates. The press carried the military orders from General Schofield's headquarters explaining that the election signified the beginning of congressional reconstruction and eventually would lead to Virginia's re-entry into the Union:

In pursuance of the act of Congress of March 23d, 1867, an election will be held for delegates to a State Convention, and to take the sense of the registered voters upon the question whether such convention shall be held for the purpose of establishing a Constitution and civil government for the State of Virginia, loyal to the Union.¹¹

Because of the uniqueness of the election, the first in Virginia to include secret balloting and Negro participation, the newspapers gave wide coverage to the mechanics of voting. On October 10 the Dispatch reminded citizens that they would decide on both the convention and delegates to it:

The voter will present himself before the registering officer, announce his name, and present the two tickets, one for or against the convention, and the other containing the names of the delegates for whom he votes. A man may vote against the Convention and for delegates.¹²

The papers paid some critical attention to the issue of disfranchisement but did not despair. On the contrary, they retained great confidence, encouraged by recent Democratic successes in several Northern states.¹³

The press quickly perceived from voter registration figures that the Negroes had an advantage despite the overall white majority. The Dispatch, however, did not suspect foul

play behind this fact allowing that it was " . . . not attributable to any attempt upon the part of General Schofield to gerrymander the State, but is the result of the fact that the Negroes almost all reside in eastern Virginia."¹⁴ The paper, moreover, optimistically predicted a conservative victory based on the political ignorance of the freedmen and the mass of yet unregistered whites.¹⁵ The Whig used the apparent black advantage to vindicate its long-standing opposition to forming a strictly white-supremist party which could not hope to attract Negroes. The Whig also foresaw a conservative victory at the polls if a coalition could be formed between the less radical freedmen and conservative whites.¹⁶

Distressed over radical organization in the capital city, the Richmond papers exhorted conservatives to similar action. Concerning the Republican meeting to nominate Richmond candidates, the Dispatch noted the total defeat of Hunnicutt's moderate opponents: "The 'Conservative' voice was scarcely heard above the Radical roar and with scarcely an exception the most violent men were recommended for nomination."¹⁷ The Enquirer continually urged the creation of local conservative tickets, invoking the horrors to come if the Republicans won:

. . . it is time for the people to awake! . . . Nefarious schemes, permanently to saddle upon this Commonwealth the atrocious rule of Radical adventurers, revengeful partizans and stupid negroes have been concocted while the good people slept.¹⁸

These journalistic efforts goading conservatives to match the political vigor of the radicals and Negroes underscore a consider-

able degree of apathy among native whites. An illustration that the press recognized this condition is an article in the October 7 Whig demanding that Virginians shake off their political lethargy.¹⁹

Belatedly, as the newspapers wished, Richmond's conservatives drew up a slate of nominees for the convention. These five candidates, Marmaduke Johnson, N. A. Sturdivant, Alexander H. Sands, William Taylor and Thomas J. Evans immediately received support from the three papers. The Whig emphasized the candidates' good will and loyalty to the Union:

All of the gentlemen . . . were old-line Whigs, save one, and he was a Douglas man in the Presidential campaign of 1860. All are heartily in favor of peace, restoration and good feeling between the North and South.²⁰

The Enquirer and the Dispatch proclaimed the conservative nominees the most deserving candidates to oppose the five radicals running for election from Richmond, J. W. Hunnicutt, Lewis Lindsey, J. C. Underwood, Joseph Cox and James Morrissey.²¹

The press realized that in Richmond, as in the rest of Virginia, the election would be decided by the black vote. Accordingly the journalists tried to persuade the Negroes, who held a majority of 961 out of 11,081 voters registered in the city, to desert the radical cause. The Whig denied the rumor spread by Hunnicutt's organization, that the whites intended to reinstate slavery if they won the election.²² Conversely, the Dispatch accused the white radicals of misguiding the freedmen and inflaming their prejudices against the white race.²³ All three newspapers tried to convince the Negroes that opposing the radical cause would be in their best interests and ensure harmonious race

relations in the capital city. The Whig encouraged every white man to persuade, by reason but not by bribery or intimidation, at least one black voter to support the conservative slate.²⁴ More ominously, the Enquirer threatened freedmen with economic sanctions adding that if the Negroes voted for radical candidates they would " . . . place themselves upon the record as enemies of the white race, and . . . utterly forfeit all claims to their kindness and confidence."²⁵

Thus culminated the campaign for the October election. The apathy of native white Virginians contrasted sharply with the political zeal of the white radicals and their Negro allies. Even when organized against Hunnicutt's party, the conservatives realized the superior position of their opponents and therefore belatedly courted the black vote. Most contemporary observers recognized the impending election as a political watershed, determining Virginia's future course in reconstruction. This awareness, together with extreme distaste for the radicals, led the Richmond press to characterize the election as a political Armageddon with no middle ground between the opposing forces.

The long-awaited election day came throughout the state on October 22. In Richmond an additional day of balloting provided for maximum participation. The newspapers printed General Schofield's orders authorizing this special extension for the capital:

The polls will be opened at 7 o'clock A.M., and will be closed at sunset. Owing to the large number of voters in

this city, it has been especially provided that the polls shall be re-opened to-morrow morning [October 23] at the same time, and closed at sunset on that day.²⁶

The federal military also supplied some 1500 troops, commanded by Major-General Granger, to augment the local police in case of rioting.²⁷

Political excitement in the capital mounted, particularly among the freedmen who gathered in large numbers at the polls on the day before the election. Several minor riots broke out on the first day of voting when federal troops dispersed Negro mobs harassing the few freedmen believed to favor the conservatives. The military easily suppressed these disruptions, however, and the election produced generally less trouble than contemporary newspapers expected.²⁸

The total vote of the city's five wards on the first day reached 5,069. Since few whites supported the radical party, the 567 white vote lead in the segregated balloting indicated a conservative victory. The jubilant press reaction enthusiastically called for an even greater margin on the second day to "redeem" the capital from radical control.²⁹ The Enquirer optimistically predicted further conservative success and extolled white supremacy:

Whatever may have been the result of the election on yesterday [October 22], the white men of the State, we feel assured, exhibited a harmony of purpose and unanimity of action which will render Negro domination absolutely impossible.³⁰

The excitement of the first day of balloting carried over into the second day with the whites retaining a slightly diminished margin of 521 out of 9,025 votes cast.³¹ The conser-

vative papers delighted in this repeat of the preceding day but suspiciously noted a new development. Because of alleged irregularities at one ward and to ensure a complete vote, General Schofield decided to re-open the polls for a third day. Satisfied with the election's outcome on the first two days, the press viewed the prospect of continued voting as just a chance for the radicals to recoup their losses:

We are sorry to have to announce that the polls will be open again We had hoped that the two days allotted to Richmond would suffice to bring out the whole vote and terminate the excitement attending the election.³²

The third day of voting confirmed the fears of the newspapers as the radicals overcame the conservative lead. The final totals for the Richmond election revealed a phenomenal voter turnout with 10,051 ballots cast out of a possible 11,081. The electorate approved the constitutional convention and elected the five radical delegates by remarkably similar margins which revealed the racial character of the vote:

Conservative	White	Black	Total
M. Johnson	4,772	25	4,797
N.A. Sturdivant	4,767	21	4,788
Wm. Taylor	4,785	26	4,811
T.J. Evans	4,760	21	4,781
A.H. Sands	4,786	23	4,811
Radical			
J.W. Hunnicutt	48	5,168	5,216
J.C. Underwood	48	5,169	5,217
James Morrissey	48	5,169	5,217
Lewis Lindsey	48	5,169	5,217
Joseph Cox	48	5,169	5,217
For Convention	145	5,183	5,328
Against	4,712	11	4,723
Total			10,051

The Virginia electorate approved the convention by a large margin as in Richmond. Of 170,229 votes cast, 107,342 favored the convention and 61,887 opposed it.³⁴ Radical delegates, including 25 Negroes, won 72 of the 105 seats in the convention.³⁵

The state vote totals intensified the dismay of Richmond's press at the election results in the capital city. Editorials proclaimed the legality of the conservative victory on the first two days and denounced the radical "theft" of the election on the third day:

We had the victory Tuesday and Wednesday, but it was snatched from us on Thursday. A three days' election . . . gave the victory to the dirtiest combination of white and black men that ever affronted public decency by offering themselves for positions of responsibility.³⁶

The magnitude of the conservative defeat and the knowledge that the freedmen were the cause, produced much bitterness and racial hostility among Virginia's conservative whites. The press deplored the solid loyalty of the blacks to the radical cause:

The election returns show with painful distinctness that the negroes have drawn a deep-red blood line between themselves and the whites, and that with them principles are nothing, color everything. Under the leadership of a few pestilent and infamous whites . . . the negroes (with few, very few exceptions) have arrayed themselves in hostility against the whites, and have left us no choice but to regard them henceforward as enemies.³⁷

Concerning the election in Richmond, the controversial decision of General Schofield to reopen the polls for a third day attracted editorial attention. Recognizing Schofield's

probity and legal responsibilities, the Dispatch nevertheless indirectly attributed the local radical victory to his actions:

We blamed him for keeping the polls open in this city, and allowing the negroes to overcome by fraud the white vote which had been fairly cast in the two days appointed in his own general orders for holding the election.³⁸

The press, however, admitted that the general only did his prescribed duty as military commander " . . . to construe all the provisions of the reconstruction acts liberally in order to give effect to the purposes of Congress, a principle one of which was to afford opportunities for a full vote" ³⁹

After the initial reaction of dismay at the election outcome, the press began to look to the future for ways to defeat the radicals:

There should be no rest, no relaxation; we should not permit ourselves to dream of repose until we have protected ourselves and our State from the ruinous and degrading misrule with which she is threatened.⁴⁰

Because the October election appeared to herald future voting in Virginia on strict racial lines, the press urged the encouragement of white immigrants to the state:

There is but one way of arresting and turning back this threatening tide of negro fanaticism and ignorance, and that is by presenting to white people at the North and abroad such inducements as they will be unable to resist.⁴¹

The journalists also realized that even if the impending convention produced a radical constitution, the electorate could reject the document:

Well, there is no doubt that we can vote down the constitution if we don't like it. The white voters remained at home throughout the State, Richmond being almost the only exception.⁴²

The press ultimately, however, came back to the need of an organized white man's party in Virginia. Acknowledging the efficiency of the radicalized freedmen and the apathy of the whites, the Dispatch demanded the formation of a conservative organization:

Without organization, the Conservatives will be as badly beaten in their next contest with Radicalism as they were in the last. The papers in the State are almost all calling for the organization of clubs, whose business it shall be to arouse the people to a sense of the dangers which menace them . . . and generally to do whatever may be needed for the perpetuation of the ascendancy of white men⁴³

Thus Richmond and Virginia elected a predominately radical convention. Meeting in December 1867, the delegates produced the Underwood constitution, named for the convention president J. C. Underwood, a radical delegate from Richmond. Although the document was completed in April 1868, the Republican leaders did not immediately submit it to voter approval in fear of rejection by the state's conservative whites who opposed the constitution's Negro suffrage and Confederate disfranchisement clauses. A year later, on April 7, 1869, President Grant approved a compromise plan by which Virginia would vote separately on the body of the constitution and the disfranchisement clause. By this compromise the conservatives grudgingly accepted Negro suffrage for the chance to defeat the disfranchisement provision which eliminated many of the state's whites from political activity. In an election on July 6, 1869 the constitution passed while the disfranchising clauses failed. The conservatives consummated their victory with the election of their candidate for governor at the same

election.⁴⁴

Thus military rule in Virginia ended and the state entered the Union with a white conservative government, entirely avoiding radical reconstruction. The decisive event in the reconstruction process was the election of October 1867: the election constituted not only an important step toward creating a loyal government necessary for readmission into the Union, but also marked a watershed in the state's political development. Defeat in the October 1867 election dismayed the state's conservatives but goaded them into forming an efficient white supremacist party organization. The conservatives recognized the prospect of block racial voting and thus organized the whites of Virginia just as Hunnicuttt radicalized the freedmen. After regaining control of the governorship in 1869, the conservatives proceeded to consolidate their position with a gradually increasing oppression of the Negro and reduction of his political and legal rights.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Julian A. C. Chandler, "The History of Suffrage in Virginia," Johns Hopkins University, Studies in Historical and Political Science, Series XLX (1901), nos. 6-7, p. 59.

² Allen W. Moger, Virginia, Bourbonism to Byrd, 1870-1925 (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1968), p. 5. (hereinafter referred to as Virginia.)

³ Dispatch (Richmond), October 5, 1867, p. 3.

⁴ Charles H. Ambler, Francis H. Pierpont (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), pp. 298-99.

⁵ Ibid. p. 299.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hamilton James Eckenrode, "The Political History of Virginia During the Reconstruction," Johns Hopkins University, Studies in Historical and Political Science, Series XXII (1966), nos. 6-8, pp. 73-76.

⁸ Alruthus Ambush Taylor, The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia (Washington D. C.: Lancaster Press, Inc., 1926), pp. 213-21. (hereinafter referred to as The Negro in Reconstruction.)

⁹ Enquirer (Richmond), August 2, 1867, p. 3.

¹⁰ Taylor, The Negro in Reconstruction, p. 221.

¹¹ Enquirer, September 24, 1867, p. 4.

¹² Dispatch, October 10, 1867, p. 1.

¹³ Enquirer, October 15, 1867, p. 1.

¹⁴ Dispatch, October 5, 1867, p. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Whig (Richmond), October 7, 1867, p. 2.

¹⁷ Dispatch, October 9, 1867, p. 1.

- 18 Enquirer, October 11, 1867, p. 2.
- 19 Whig, October 7, 1867, p. 2.
- 20 Ibid. October 21, 1867, p. 2.
- 21 Enquirer, October 22, 1867, p. 2.
- 22 Whig, October 22, 1867, p. 2.
- 23 Dispatch, October 16, 1867, p. 2.
- 24 Whig, October 19, 1867, p. 2.
- 25 Enquirer, October 22, 1867, p. 2.
- 26 Dispatch, October 22, 1867, p. 1.
- 27 Ibid. October 23, 1867, p. 1.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Whig, October 23, 1867, p. 2.
- 30 Enquirer, October 25, 1867, p. 1.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Whig, October 24, 1867, p. 2.
- 33 Dispatch, October 26, 1867, p. 1.
- 34 Ibid. November 1, 1867, p. 2.
- 35 Roger, Virginia, p. 2.
- 36 Whig, October 25, 1867, p. 2.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Dispatch, October 31, 1867, p. 2.
- 39 Whig, November 1, 1867, p. 2.
- 40 Dispatch, October 25, 1867, p. 2.
- 41 Whig, October 26, 1867, p. 2.
- 42 Dispatch, October 26, 1867, p. 2.

⁴³Ibid. November 6, 1867, p. 2.

⁴⁴Charles E. Wynes, Race Relations in Virginia, 1870-1902 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1961), pp. 2-5.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Dispatch (Richmond). September-November 1867.

The daily Dispatch gave the best articulation of the political sentiments of the majority of Virginia's conservative whites. Fearful of radical and Negro domination, the Dispatch's editorial policy reflected a paternalistic attitude toward the freedman and an unquestioned belief in white supremacy.

Enquirer (Richmond). September-November 1867.

Of the three major Richmond papers, the Enquirer was the most emotional in its denunciations and vilifications of radicals and politically-minded Negroes. The Enquirer's threat to retaliate with economic sanctions against Negroes voting for radicals indicated the degree of racial hostility of the paper's editors and foreshadowed the growing, active white repression of the Negro in the South.

Whig (Richmond). September-November 1867.

The Richmond Whig was the least reactionary of the major papers in the former capital of the Confederacy because of its acceptance of the reality of Congressional reconstruction and its unsuccessful attempt to moderate the radical Republican party in Virginia. When the election of 1867 came, however, the Whig, like the other papers, expressed fear at the possibility of Negro rule and upheld the validity of white supremacy.

Secondary Sources:

Ambler, Charles H. Francis H. Pierpont. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937.

This rather dull account of an important figure in Virginia's reconstruction history, who had not before been researched, includes some useful information concerning the activities of the Republican party in Virginia in 1867.

Chandler, Julian A. C. "The History of Suffrage in Virginia," Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Series XLX (1901), Nos. 6-7.

This old and outdated history nevertheless includes some important statistics and general information pertinent to the election of 1867.

Eckenrode, Hamilton James. "The Political History of Virginia During the Reconstruction," Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, Series XXII (1966), Nos. 6-8.

Eckenrode's venerable history of Virginia during the post-civil war era is especially helpful as a general survey of political developments surrounding the 1867 constitutional convention election.

Moger, Allen W. Virginia, Bourbonism to Byrd, 1870-1925. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1968.

Moger's fine account of Virginia history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries unfortunately does not go back far enough to include more than a cursory treatment of the 1867 election.

Taylor, Alruthus Ambush. The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia. Washington D. C.: Lancaster Press Inc., 1926.

Taylor's work adequately deals with the entire social situation of the Negro in the post-civil war period.

Wynes, Charles E. Race Relations in Virginia, 1870-1902. Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1961.

This monograph is an excellent and quite readable study. Writing to check the validity of C. Vann Woodward's findings in The Strange Career of Jim Crow, Wynes gives thorough coverage to Virginia race relations in the last half of the nineteenth century. The author's introductory material is especially helpful in tying together the narrative of events in the early years of reconstruction.