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A Bold Promise: Black Readjusters and the Founding of Virginia State University

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A Bold Promise: Black Readjusters and the Founding of Virginia State University

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Newton, Massachusetts

Bachelor of Arts, Duke University, 2010

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

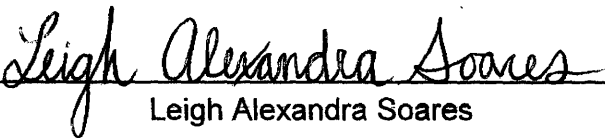
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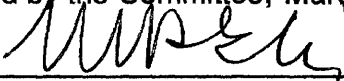
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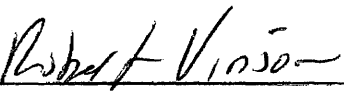
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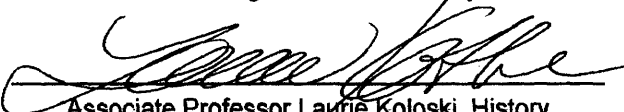
Master of Arts.


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ABSTRACT PAGE

This thesis examines the active role of Virginia's African American population in the Readjuster Party, which dominated state politics from 1880 to 1884. By analyzing this historically important movement, I clarify both the possibilities and limitations of black political participation in the post-Reconstruction South. The black activists studied in this thesis advocated a number of reforms, including the founding of Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (Virginia State University), the permanent establishment of Central Lunatic Asylum (Central State Hospital), and the introduction of all-black faculties to black public schools across the state. Sources for my study include a variety of archival materials, newspapers, state government records, and published reports. This thesis argues that black Readjusters displayed far more foresight than previous scholars have recognized. The movement provided a truly democratic alternative to the post-Reconstruction rise of white supremacy and black disfranchisement, and Afro-Virginians fashioned it to affirm their right to self-determination. By using their political influence to support institution-building that would long outlast the Readjuster Party itself, black Readjusters ensured an enduring legacy in Virginia.

For Granny

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Acknowledgements

These pages represent a true labor of love—love of intellectual inquiry, of the rich heritage of African Americans, and, as always, the love of history.

Credit is due to many who nurtured me through this effort. My meaningful graduate experience at The College of William & Mary was made all the more special with the guidance and support of my advisor, Melvin Ely, who always knew just what to say to keep me on track. Research seminar instructor Dr. Andrew Fisher and my thesis committee members Dr. Ely, Dr. Robert Vinson, and Dr. Laurie Koloski all lent their wisdom to help stretch my thinking and polish my work.

The research phase of this endeavor was made easier with the assistance of key individuals. The Library of Virginia's Brent Tarter was a superb field guide through the wealth of data available at that fine institution. Many thanks also to Lucious Edwards, Jr., a most knowledgeable source of information as head of Virginia State University's Special Collections and Archives. He and Assistant Archivist Jessica Johnson graciously aided my probe into the University's early history.

I have saved the last heartfelt praise for my family, without whom I cannot imagine a complete existence. I am forever thankful for the support of my mother, father, brother, and grandparents. To the Soares and White clans, loads of love!

On October 1, 1883, sixty-two black men and women wended their way through several mill towns inhabited mainly by whites; the group's destination, atop a hill at the edge of Petersburg, was known as Fleets Farm. There, in a two-story, twelve-room house that had been built in 1834, the men and women gathered for the opening day of classes at the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, the nation's first public, four-year college for African Americans. Beyond being a school run *for* blacks, it was a school run *by* blacks; at the time its doors opened, the Institute had a black principal, an entirely black faculty, and a majority-black Board of Visitors. How did Virginia's African American population come to achieve such a public affirmation of its right to self-determination, along with almost complete control of a collegiate institution and its state-issued funding, at a time when most southern states went out of their way to avoid granting blacks any form of power?

In some ways, Virginia was the last place one might have expected such a progressive turn. Because control of state politics passed directly from military reconstruction in 1867-68 to Conservative rule, the party had a head start in perfecting strategies to minimize the impact of black suffrage without raising federal suspicion. As historian Allen Moger argues about the state's Conservative party, "Their program of conservative moderation had won the support of President Grant and enough men of like mind in Congress to enable the state to avoid the worst aspects of radical reconstruction experienced by states of the lower South."¹ (Moger's archaic term *worst* can be translated into modern parlance as *exacting*.) On the other hand, this unique experience of

¹ The ascendancy of the Conservative party significantly curtailed black participation in government. In 1869, 29 blacks were elected to the General Assembly, but just 17 were elected two years later. Allen W. Moger, *Virginia: Bourbonism to Byrd, 1870-1925* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1968), pages 1 and 24.

Reconstruction may also have made some white Virginians more amenable to unorthodox ideas. Throughout the South, “Redeemers” relied upon twisted memories of Reconstruction, Northern “aggression,” and the threat of “Negro domination” to maintain white solidarity. Blacks, although officially enfranchised by the Fourteenth Amendment, by the turn of the twentieth century were systematically excluded from government, often through elaborate registration and election laws or voter fraud.² But in Virginia, the Conservative party’s steady grasp on state political control diluted its ability to use ideas about the precariousness of white supremacy as a plausible rallying point.³

As different as Virginia’s experience of Reconstruction was from that of its sister southern states, the Commonwealth in the latter 1870s shared with other parts of the region a growing impatience with the Conservatives’ rigid and unilateral command of power. The region was still devastated by the economic effects of the Civil War, and, in many cases, Redeemer policies only worsened the states’ poverty. The official end of Reconstruction in 1877 could not stem the tide of dissatisfaction, particularly among farmers, debtors, and African Americans. As a result, Republicans and independents sometimes tried to work together to recapture political control, with some measure of success. The Republican Party made a decent showing in congressional races in the Atlantic plains of Virginia and North Carolina, the mountains of Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia, the cotton uplands of Arkansas, and the counties along the lower Mississippi River. Additionally, from 1880 to 1884, “between 30 and 46 percent of the voters in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas cast their ballot

² C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 51-55.

³ Carl N. Degler, *The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 270.

for independent candidates for Congress.” Still, only in Virginia did an independent party emerge strong enough to wield significant state power, from which blacks benefited greatly.⁴

The group that emerged in Virginia, known as the Readjusters, was the most successful biracial coalition in the post-Reconstruction South. The party dominated Virginia state politics from 1880 to 1884, defeating the conservative white Virginians, known as Funders for advocating full repayment of the state’s pre-Civil War debt. Readjusters swept the state legislative elections twice, filled both seats in the United States Senate, won the governorship in 1881, and took six of Virginia’s ten seats in the U. S. House of Representatives. Carl Degler argues that “it was the most extensive rebuff to Democratic rule in a Southern state since Reconstruction.”⁵ In their four years in power, the Readjusters implemented a progressive political, economic, and social platform. Yet their rule remains an understudied example of radical, democratic reform.

Despite the party’s sizable base of black voters, scholars have long approached the period with a top-down focus on white leaders’ motivations and rhetoric, largely ignoring or misinterpreting the black community’s own reform agenda. This is an error, for the extent of black activism in Readjuster Virginia is significant both in its own right and as evidence of the political possibilities that existed for freedmen even on the cusp of the rise of the business-dominated, white supremacist New South.

Although the Readjusters were named for their commitment to negotiating a reduction, or “readjustment,” of Virginia’s pre-Civil War debt, they called for a number

⁴ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 60; Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pages 37 and 45-47.

⁵ Degler, *The Other South*, 278-79.

of other radical reforms that appealed to voters across racial and class lines. The party repealed the poll tax, abolished the whipping post, abolished the chain gang, increased state funding for public schools, and appointed influential blacks to civic offices, among many other accomplishments. Black Readjusters expressed their agency within the political machine by promoting the establishment and improvement of public institutions for African Americans. The party succeeded in founding the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute in Petersburg (now called Virginia State University), as well as an insane asylum in the same city and new elementary schools with all-black faculties across the state. In light of these achievements, it is important to determine just how much control Afro-Virginians had over the creation and maintenance of these institutions.

Much of the previous scholarship on the Readjusters has focused on the party's white leadership. Carl Degler and James Tice Moore devote considerable attention to the party leader, William Mahone, in their assessments of the Readjusters' success. A former Confederate major general, Mahone became an outspoken opponent of Funder mismanagement in the 1870s. Many considered him a skilled politician whose pragmatism helped unite the various factions of Readjusters.⁶ However, as Harold Forsythe astutely argues, "The first step in viewing freedpeople's political history from the bottom up must be to reexamine the notion that local political leaders were, of necessity, clients of powerful officeholders such as Mahone, or that they were disciplined followers of a national political party run from the capital." His in-depth portrayal of

⁶ Degler, *The Other South*, 271-79; James Tice Moore, *Two Paths to the New South: The Virginia Debt Controversy, 1870-1883* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 93-109.

blacks' negotiations with the Republican Party in Virginia provides an important model for studying local networks of political activism among African Americans.⁷

More recently, scholars have begun to consider the racial dynamics of the Readjuster Party's political strategy, examining the use of racial rhetoric by whites in both the Readjuster and Funder parties. Jane Dailey's *Before Jim Crow* offers perhaps the most sophisticated interpretation of the racial anxiety produced by the Readjusters' success; she examines the party's attempt to provide public opportunities for blacks while allowing the conservative ideology of segregation to rule in private spheres, and she exposes the tensions over racial etiquette and public behavior that precipitated the 1883 race riot in Danville, which in turn led to the end of Readjuster rule in Virginia in the statewide elections of that year.⁸ Substantial, sensitive work on black Readjusters themselves, however, is difficult to find.

Putting the focus on black activism in Readjuster Virginia requires an understanding of post-bellum radical politics and of black institution-building in the emancipated South. The historiography as it stands today reflects a sense that the Readjuster Party, like all the other independent political movements of the late nineteenth century, was in many ways doomed from its inception. In an article on the Readjusters, Moore even argues that blacks were ultimately responsible for the Readjuster defeat in 1883 by demanding too much progress toward equality too fast.⁹ By contrast, I believe

⁷ Harold S. Forsythe, "'But My Friends Are Poor': Ross Hamilton and Freedpeople's Politics in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, 1869-1901," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 105.4 (1997): 409-438, JSTOR. Quotation on pages 437-38.

⁸ Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁹ James Tice Moore, "Black Militancy in Readjuster Virginia, 1879-1883," *The Journal of Southern History* 41.2 (May, 1975): 167-186, JSTOR, 186.

the Readjusters present some of the strongest evidence of an alternative direction racial politics might have taken in the late nineteenth century.

The Readjuster Party emerged out of discontent with elite rule similar to that expressed by the Grangers, the Greenbackers, and later, the Populists. These movements all “desired state and local government to work in the interest of the great mass of ordinary citizens by providing free public education, protecting men’s political rights, and curbing the power of economic elites to exploit the labor of farmers and workers.”¹⁰

Amid this company of late-nineteenth-century reformers, the Readjusters stand out as much for their impressive success in attaining federal recognition and patronage as for their wide-sweeping progressivism. The role of black agitation in shaping reform in Readjuster Virginia constitutes an important but neglected chapter in the long history of black community-building, having produced important all-black institutions such as schools and churches. Some of the major achievements of black Readjusters, aside from Virginia Normal School, included an expansion in the number of black grade schools, teachers, and administrators in Virginia.

Historians have examined the role of the Freedmen’s Bureau in the education of blacks in the post-emancipation South. In addition, modern scholars have studied how these institutions functioned within the late-nineteenth-century framework of segregation and white supremacy that came to characterize the South, often viewing them as spaces for black resistance and autonomy. However, much of the scholarship on building black communities after Reconstruction centers on the contributions of elite blacks and Northern whites, or focuses on the Washington-Du Bois debates. James D. Anderson’s

¹⁰ Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 4.

book, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, places considerable emphasis on the philanthropy of white missionary societies and the normal school model of education as epitomized by the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. In contrast, this thesis will focus on Afro-Virginian activists themselves and their overt engagement with Readjusterism to create a significant mass political movement within their own community.¹¹

By using their political influence to support community-building that would long outlast the Readjuster Party itself, black Readjusters displayed far more foresight than previous scholars have recognized. The movement was a dramatic example of a truly democratic alternative to the post-Reconstruction rise of white supremacy and black disfranchisement. The party expanded the franchise to those who had previously been excluded because of their race or class, providing a model for black political participation in the New South. An examination of public educational institutions fortified in the early 1880s will reveal how blacks specifically used the Readjuster platform to strengthen their own communities. Rather than merely serve as subordinate or exploited cogs in a political machine, black Readjusters understood the significant opportunity that lay before them and approached it with both political shrewdness and a measure of hope.

Long before the state college for blacks in Petersburg opened its doors to students, there were those who envisioned what the school might mean to Virginia's black population. African American tradition included a strong belief in the American

¹¹ See the following literature on black education: Paul Cimbala, *The Freedmen's Bureau: Reconstructing the American South after the Civil War* (Malabar: Krieger Publishing, 2005); Robert Francis Engs, *Educating the Disfranchised and Disinherited* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

conception of progress, a component of which stated that freedom could not exist without education.¹² Thus, education served as a means of economic, intellectual, and even spiritual uplift for black communities after Emancipation. Yet that education typically could be obtained only at white-controlled institutions. Blacks' control over their own education at the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute was one outcome—perhaps the most radical one—of a debate over who should control black schools that continued throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

Blacks' desire for some level of autonomy became clear almost as soon as the conversation about black schooling began during the Civil War. On one hand, making positions available for black teachers and administrators would create job opportunities for a people whose choices, even among the elite of the race, were severely limited by white prejudice. Since the color line would never allow blacks to teach in white public schools, every white teacher in a black public school represented a job lost from the black community. There was even more at stake once Readjuster Virginia passed a law ordering equal pay for black and white teachers.¹³ However, there was also a much deeper set of principles that inspired the movement for black control of black schools.

Considering the legacies of slavery and white resistance to Reconstruction, blacks often questioned the underlying motives of white educators. During Reconstruction, even the relationship between southern black communities and northern white missionaries, who sometimes functioned as sympathetic allies, could be tense. Black ministers frequently butted heads with missionaries over control of local religious activity and

¹² Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 1.

¹³ Chapter 40 in *Acts and Joint Resolutions passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia during the session of 1881-82* (Richmond: Superintendent Public Printing, 1882), Library of Virginia, 37.

education.¹⁴ Again and again, black citizens expressed skepticism that white teachers could suppress their own racial prejudices in the classroom. In 1869, Bishop James Walker Hood told North Carolina's constitutional convention, "I do not think that it is good for our children to eat and drink daily the sentiment that they are naturally inferior to the whites, which they do in three-fourths of all the schools where they have white teachers."¹⁵ A decade later, Reverend H. M. Turner wrote a letter to Richmond's local black newspaper complaining about the treatment he received from white teachers while visiting Hampton Institute. His assertions echoed Hood's: "I am as sure that negro inferiority is taught by act, if not by word, as I am that the alphabet is taught."¹⁶ Although most blacks opposed the system of segregation, they understood it would not soon be supplanted; exerting independence and influence within their own institutions naturally became important to freedpeople.¹⁷

Education was therefore a major platform plank with which Mahone could hope to secure the loyalty of blacks, who constituted nearly a third of the Virginia electorate. Virginians had struggled over the distribution of state resources throughout the 1870s. While the Conservative Party ruled the state, Funders diverted resources away from the public schools, so that by 1879, half of the state's schools failed to open for the new school year. Readjusters thus were able to garner support from voters across lines of race and class in part because of their commitment to public spending, especially on

¹⁴ Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 59-95.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶ "The Hampton Institute," *The Virginia Star* 11 May 1878.

¹⁷ Historian Howard Rabinowitz argues that the failure of the 1875 Civil Rights Act to forbid segregation in public schools helped convince blacks that segregated schools would be a long-term fixture in society. Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Half a Loaf: The Shift from White to Black Teachers in the Negro Schools of the Urban South, 1865-1890," *The Journal of Southern History* 40.4 (Nov. 1974): 565-94, JSTOR, 579.

education. The first article in the statement of principles adopted at the Readjuster State Convention in Richmond in 1881 appealed to voters of modest means belonging to both races: “We recognize our obligation to support the institution for the deaf, dumb, and blind, the lunatic asylum, the public free schools, and the Government out of the revenues of the State...”¹⁸

However, it took much more than pledges to expand public spending to convince black legislators and their constituents to cast their lot with the Readjuster Party. Although Readjusters won a majority of seats in the General Assembly in 1879, their ticket suffered at the polls in 1880. White party leaders were torn between retaining conservative white support and fully cooperating with black Virginians, who held the balance of power in the event of a split white vote.¹⁹ At the same time, black activists across the state questioned the Readjusters’ sincerity. It certainly was not a foregone conclusion that abandoning the Republican Party would be a wise political decision for Virginia’s black population.

For some prominent blacks, the very idea of debt readjustment made the emerging party seem unpalatable. One editorial in 1879 in *The People’s Advocate*, a black newspaper in Alexandria, urged Virginians to honor the state debt. The author wrote, “It is the duty of every republican voter to poll his vote for legislative candidates who want no more tinkering of the State debt in the way of further ‘re-adjustment’... The debt is a just one and Virginia is able to pay it.”²⁰ More commonly, though, blacks did not fixate on honoring the entire state debt, but rather awaited proof of the Readjusters’

¹⁸ Degler, *The Other South*, 277; “The Readjusters’ Party,” *The New York Times* 3 June 1881.

¹⁹ Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890*, Illini Books ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 100.

²⁰ “Repudiation in Virginia,” *The People’s Advocate* 20 September 1879.

commitment to social and political reform. Afro-Virginians knew significant change required more than a few token concessions. After all, as John Wesley Cromwell, editor of *The People's Advocate*, reminded readers in the wake of Readjuster victories in the General Assembly in 1879, even the majority-Conservative legislatures of the past decade had allowed blacks to hold certain governmental positions. According to him, “when the re-adjusters carry out their pledge to enact a fair jury law, to abolish the convict labor system, to abandon the whipping post, to repeal the miscegenation law, or at best place themselves on record, it will [be] time ‘to shout the harvest home.’”²¹ Others repeated similar sentiments throughout the early years of the party’s establishment. Editors of Richmond’s black newspaper, *The Virginia Star*, became suspicious of Readjusters for “vilifying and fighting the Straight Republicans.”²² Readjuster leaders may have understood that they needed black support, but blacks could not yet be sure that they needed or could trust the Readjusters.

Whether or not they realized it immediately, blacks held a considerable amount of political capital in the latter 1870s. Before most black activists had fully made up their minds on the reliability of Mahone and his collaborators, white opponents of reform expressed concern over how much pressure the Readjusters would be under to adopt a radical agenda. In March of 1879, editors of the conservative *Richmond State* explained where blacks’ integration into the Readjuster Party could lead: “The Readjusters ask the negroes to vote with them. They must, of course, be prepared to vote for what the negroes demand... The inevitable direction of the new party is to social equality, mixed schools,

²¹ *The People's Advocate* 6 December 1879.

²² *The Virginia Star* 27 August 1881.

negroes in the hotels and dress circles of the Theatre...”²³ It is telling how in this moment of political upheaval, even those opposed to racial equality saw future black Readjusters as wielders of power rather than merely as tools manipulated by the white party bosses.

White supremacists were right to fear the formation of an alliance between African Americans and the Readjuster Party. Virginia’s black population had groomed many community leaders with experience in Republican Party politics and civil rights activism, and these were the men to whom the Readjusters most desperately needed to prove themselves. Among them was Peter J. Carter. Born a slave in 1845, he escaped in 1861 when Union troops entered Virginia’s Eastern Shore, and he enlisted in a regiment of the United States Colored Infantry. He settled in Northampton County after the end of the Civil War and attended the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. A well-respected leader, he established a reputation as a tireless activist and gifted speaker during his eight-year tenure in Virginia’s House of Delegates.

From 1872 to 1880, Carter represented his home county in the General Assembly as a member of the Republican Party. He served on numerous state and national committees, was elected temporary chairman at the 1876 Republican State Convention in Lynchburg, and championed many causes on behalf of African Americans. Along with joining a delegation in 1872 to seek President Grant’s support for the civil rights bill pending in Congress, he took up the charge to amend laws discriminating against blacks in court. In 1879, Carter submitted a substitute report to the Assembly in place of the majority report of a committee on which he served, pressing for blacks’ right to serve on juries as well as equal punishment for blacks and whites convicted of crimes. Initially

²³ “Hurrah for Halifax!” *Richmond State* 1 March 1879.

against the idea of debt readjustment, he was an example of the kind of prominent black activist who could not be converted to the Readjuster Party through lofty rhetoric alone.²⁴

Two other men involved in the fight for fair trials were Dr. Daniel M. Norton and Reverend William Troy. They worked together actively on the Committee on Business at Virginia's 1869 State Colored Convention, which produced several resolutions, including a request for an order to end racial discrimination in jury selection. Although Norton was born a slave in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1840, he managed to escape north, studying medicine in New York. After the Civil War, the physician returned to his home state and became involved in politics. Representing James City and York Counties, he was one of about two dozen African American men elected to the 1867-1868 constitutional convention, and he later served two stints in the Virginia Senate, 1871-1873 and 1877-1883. His medical practice attended both blacks and whites in his county for forty years. William Troy was also well respected by his fellow citizens, serving Richmond as a Baptist minister and known to be an "indefatigable worker."²⁵

As early as 1869, Norton, Troy, and the other members of the Colored Convention declared the importance of public education for blacks as a civil right similar to the right to a jury of one's peers. In the same report they resolved "that we consider a wise and comprehensive system of free schools to us at least as imperatively necessary, and that we will regard every colored man in the State as recreant to his race who

²⁴ For information on Peter J. Carter, see "Carter, Peter Jacob," *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2006), 81-4; "The Proceedings of the Republican State Convention at Lynchburg, Va.," *The People's Advocate* 22 April 1876; "General Assembly," *Richmond State* 31 January 1879; *The Virginia Star*, 23 July 1881.

²⁵ For information on Daniel M. Norton and William Troy, see "State Colored Convention," *Richmond Dispatch* 29 May 1869; Luther P. Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia, 1865-1895* (Norfolk: Guide Quality Press, 1945), 30; Moore, *Two Paths to the New South*, Appendix C; William Troy, 1870 Freedman's Bank record, Richmond, series M816, roll 26, page 437, account 1481, Heritage Quest; "The Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute," *The People's Advocate* 11 March 1882.

neglects to do everything in his power towards the establishment of such a free school system.”²⁶ They could not have known then how the Republican Party would become ineffectual as a vehicle to achieve these goals after Reconstruction. Instead, it would be the Readjuster Party that would work with them to institute a flurry of the very sort of radical change for which black activists had striven.

For years, men like Carter and Norton had worked to put black men on juries without much success. After Readjusters gained majority control of the General Assembly in 1879, Mahone began a campaign to expand his black support by addressing this and several other issues of importance to Virginia’s black population. He ordered all state judges newly elected by the party to summon jurors without regard to race. Not every Readjuster judge agreed with the policy, but in 1880, blacks served on a jury in Hustings Court for the first time. Later that year, the United States Supreme Court rendered a national decision banning the practice of omitting the names of qualified blacks from jury lists.²⁷ During the 1881-82 legislative session, black men filled three of Virginia’s 37 State Senate seats. The House of Delegates had 95 members, thirteen of whom were African American. Under Readjuster influence, the total number of black assemblymen had risen from just five in 1878 to sixteen.²⁸ Enrollment in black schools increased from 36,000 in 1879 to 91,000 in 1883. The number of black teachers,

²⁶ “State Colored Convention,” *Richmond Dispatch* 29 May 1869.

²⁷ “Colored Jurymen,” *Richmond State* 2 June 1879; Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond*, 91; “From the Old Dominion,” *The People’s Advocate* 24 April 1880.

²⁸ George F. Bragg, Jr., Letter to Carter G. Woodson, 26 August 1926, *The Journal of Negro History* 11.4 (Oct. 1926), 678; James H. Johnston, “The Participation of Negroes in the Government of Virginia from 1877 to 1888,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 14.3 (Jul. 1929), 261; Moore, “Black Militancy in Readjuster Virginia, 1879-1883,” 168.

principals, and schools all nearly tripled.²⁹ More and more Afro-Virginians began to feel it was time, as J. W. Cromwell had put it, “to shout the harvest home,” and elation over the growing alliance between Afro-Virginians and the Readjusters spread to blacks across the country. An 1881 article in *The Virginia Star* labeled Mahone the “Coming Emancipator.” Editors of *The Conservator*, a black paper in Chicago, declared, “We are for Mahone because Mahone is for us.” Cromwell himself suggested an even stronger reason to believe in the democratic system instituted by Readjuster rule: “This revolutionary system, this outgrowth of a new civilization, is paving the way toward a most satisfactory solution of the whole question involving the future of the colored people.”³⁰

The relationship between Mahone and Virginia’s African-American leaders became a mutually beneficial partnership. Mahone needed the support of black voters, and blacks used the Readjuster Party to gain access to new sources of political power and patronage. The party delivered on its promises early and often, accomplishing some of what black activists had been pushing for since 1865, so that by 1881, Readjuster candidate William Cameron carried 28 of the 32 majority-black counties in the gubernatorial race, and nearly all of the state’s black legislators had signed on to the Readjuster movement.³¹

Amid the growing excitement that Virginia’s biracial coalition might become the model for former Confederate states’ progressive transition from the Old South, a

²⁹ Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond*, 103; Dailey, “Expanding the Circle of Honor: The Politics of Patronage,” in *Before Jim Crow*, 48-76.

³⁰ “Mahone the Coming Emancipator,” *The Virginia Star* 30 April 1880; “Mahone,” *The Conservator* 8 September 1883; “The New South,” *The People’s Advocate* 14 January 1882.

³¹ Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond*, 103

younger member of the Readjusters' black political cohort made history on the floor of the State Legislature. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Alfred W. Harris had never been a slave. His family came from a long line of free blacks in Virginia, and after attending public schools in Alexandria, he enrolled in Howard University Law School. Upon his graduation in 1881, he opened his own successful practice in Petersburg. He made his residence in neighboring Dinwiddie County, which he represented in the state House of Delegates from 1881 to 1888. Journalist and community leader George F. Bragg, Jr., later remembered Harris, despite his relative lack of political experience before 1881, as "ready, eloquent, and forceful...he was as bold as a lion, sarcastic, and, at times, almost brutal in debate."³² There were few men better suited to lead the fight for state-funded collegiate education for blacks in Virginia.

When Harris rose before the House of Delegates to introduce a bill for the establishment of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, it was not only the culmination of blacks' decades-long battle for public support of education in Virginia but also a sign of confidence in the Readjuster coalition. The bill would make Virginia Normal the first fully state-supported college for blacks in the United States, and even more impressively, it gave blacks operational control of the institution. On February 14, 1882, a Funder (conservative) representative of Augusta County expressed staunch opposition to Harris's bill, insisting that the school employ white teachers and administrators. Harris came to his bill's defense with a bold message. "Neither, Mr. Speaker, do we want a white Board of Visitors," he argued defiantly, "for this would be a

³² Luther P. Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia, 1865-1895* (Norfolk: Guide Quality Press, 1945), 20; George F. Bragg, Jr., Letter to Carter G. Woodson, 26 August 1926, *The Journal of Negro History*, 679.

confession of our weakness to manage our own seminary of learning. And this admission we do not feel called upon to make, for we feel that we can successfully manage a first-class institution of learning, and such we intend to make this.” Harris urged his fellow legislators to reject the proposed amendment and concluded by offering his heartfelt vision of what the school could mean for the future of black communities. “I do not want this bill amended. I do not want it loaded down and choked up so that it will not effect the object in view,” he said. “I want a place where all of our blacks, girls and boys, may go and drink from the fountain of knowledge until their ambition is satiated, and then step into the world prepared as good and upright citizens to meet its responsibilities, and battle for a place among men upon their merit.”³³

On March 6, 1882, the Readjuster-led General Assembly approved an act to establish the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute along the lines Harris had proposed. The new law required that six of the seven men appointed by the governor to the Board of Visitors “shall be well-qualified colored men,” eliminating any possibility that the Institute would serve merely as a mechanism for white men to impose paternalistic views of black education.³⁴ These men would control the operations of the school and use the state-provided funding at their discretion. One hundred thousand dollars was to cover the initial building costs, raised from the Commonwealth’s sale of the Atlantic, Mississippi and Ohio railroad. Then, in a sum comparable to what Virginia’s other public institutions of higher learning received, the auditor of public accounts would pay the Board of Visitors twenty thousand dollars annually after the school opened. A

³³ “Normal School,” *Richmond Daily Whig* 15 February 1882.

³⁴ Chapter 266, Article 4 in *Acts and Joint Resolutions passed by the General Assembly, 1881-82*, 284.

portion of this funding would help pay the faculty, which article 12 of the act mandated should consist entirely of black men and women.³⁵ In the end, the passage of legislation that so explicitly gave African Americans power and influence over a public institution was as much a testimony to the black Readjusters' political sophistication and adroitness as it was to the party's coalitionist spirit.

Many of the men involved in the founding of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute were experienced politicians and prominent Readjusters. After seeing his bill approved, Harris continued to serve the Institute as secretary of the Board of Visitors, and he has been revered since then as the founder of Virginia State University. The other board members were similarly well qualified, as the Assembly act had instructed.³⁶ The Board of Visitors elected Peter J. Carter its first rector, or president, and Daniel M. Norton its first treasurer. Rounding out the roster of black board members were William Troy, Robert L. Mitchell, and Captain William H. Pleasants. Readjuster reforms had previously converted community leaders Carter, Norton, and Troy to the party. Mitchell's background as a school teacher in Alexandria gave the board a strong educator's perspective. Pleasants, while never elected to the General Assembly, frequently acted as a local black spokesman in Danville.³⁷ He was also, like many of his colleagues, a firm believer in black self-determination. On March 19, 1881, Pleasants wrote to Senator

³⁵ Chapter 266, Articles 12 and 15 in *Acts and Joint Resolutions passed by the General Assembly, 1881-82*, 285-286.

³⁶ For names and backgrounds of all the men on the first Board of Visitors, see Moore, *Two Paths to the New South*, Appendix C; Luther P. Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia, 1865-1895* (Norfolk: Guide Quality Press, 1945); Edgar Toppin, *Loyal Sons and Daughters: Virginia State University, 1882 to 1992* (Norfolk: Pictorial Heritage Publishing Company, 1992), 15; Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute Board of Visitor Minutes, (Feb.) 1883-(Mar.) 1902, University Archives, Virginia State University, Petersburg, VA.

³⁷ One newspaper article referred to Pleasants as "one of the most impassioned orators in the State..." "The Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute," *The People's Advocate* 11 March 1882. See also *The People's Advocate* 27 May 1876.

Mahone on behalf of Danville's black citizens, seeking Mahone's help in the removal of the city tax collector. He added that, "if we should succeed in having W. L. Fernald removed, we would like to have a say in the selection of another."³⁸ All six men brought leadership experience and a strong sense of purpose to the new school.

The only white man appointed to the Board of Visitors was an alumnus of The College of William and Mary, 42-year-old Brunswick County judge F. E. Buford. Richard R. Farr served as an ex-officio member in his role as state superintendent of public instruction from 1882-1886. Like William Mahone, Farr was a Confederate veteran who turned to a life of politics, serving in the House from 1877-1883. His strong affiliation with the Readjuster movement certainly helped him obtain the prestigious superintendent's position at the height of the party's influence.

Despite their status as prominent white men, there is no indication that Farr or Buford had a disproportionate voice on the board due to their race. In fact, at a meeting in March 1883, Farr appealed to the board to reconsider its selection of Fleets Farm as the site of the school, but the board ultimately stuck by its choice.³⁹ Decision-making powers about everything related to the Institute rested with the majority, the well-educated black men. Minutes from the initial Board of Visitors meetings show the extraordinary amount of control the seven members had in planning nearly every detail of Virginia Normal's establishment. Having chosen Fleets Farm as the site for the school, they purchased the 30.5 acres for \$13,500 on behalf of the Commonwealth. They interviewed and hired the main architect as well as all the sub-contractors for lumber, cement, bricks, carpentry,

³⁸ Correspondence, Box 26, William Mahone Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

³⁹ Board of Visitor Minutes, (Feb.) 1883-(Mar.) 1902, University Archives, Virginia State University, Petersburg, VA. Meeting dated 22 March 1883.

stone work, painting, and more. By the time the school opened in October, the board had hired five faculty members, as well as a matron, a cook, and a janitor, all African American.⁴⁰

Also included in the purview of the Board of Visitors was the specific design of the curriculum. The Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute offered three different tracks: a two-year college preparatory program, a three-year normal (teacher-training) department, and a four-year college department culminating in a bachelor's degree. In their initial proposed course of study, the board members took great care to balance the acquisition of practical skills such as reading, spelling, arithmetic, and teaching with a more classical education gained through coursework in advanced sciences and mathematics, English literature, Latin, and philosophy.⁴¹

The desire among African Americans to obtain vocational skills as well as classical intellectual development reflected freedpeople's desire to make great strides both in the workplace and in roles of leadership or influence. Thus, founding Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute epitomized the black Readjusters' agenda. In his initial defense of the bill to establish the college, Harris told the delegates, "we have ambition for the different learned professions, for business, and some of us want the classical and scientific instruction which the college will give." Later, R. L. Mitchell reiterated the importance of offering students a well-rounded curriculum. "We desire an institution that will give not *only* normal training," he argued, "but also a knowledge of the higher branches of learning, thoroughly equipping its students for all the walks of life. All of us

⁴⁰ Board of Visitor Minutes, (Feb.) 1883-(Mar.) 1902, University Archives, Virginia State University, Petersburg, VA. See minutes from meetings throughout 1883.

⁴¹ Ibid. Meeting dated 22 March 1883.

do not expect to be teachers.” This ability to envision all that African Americans could achieve if given the opportunity proves just how vital it was for black Readjusters to gain control of their own institutions.⁴²

That black Virginians were the first to be awarded almost complete control of a public college was therefore a deeply meaningful achievement. Alfred Harris knew, long before the school opened its doors to students, that the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute represented a major victory for the black self-determination movement. As he told the legislature, “I know that with such an opportunity as this institution will give we can demonstrate to that class of gentlemen in Virginia who do not believe that we can comprehend the higher training that we are their intellectual equals.” It was clear that the very establishment of the Institute would be a public statement about the progress and capabilities of African Americans. Virginia Normal’s first principal, James Storum, confirmed it as such when he extolled, “No State in this country has taken a position as radical as this, placing State funds and a State institution in the hands of colored men. This certainly is the first opportunity the colored people have been given to test their capacity to manage a public trust and to develop business tact.”⁴³ Black Readjusters seemed to have proved that the time for blacks’ public participation in government had not ended with the federal abandonment of Reconstruction in 1877.

By the time the school officially opened in October 1883, there were high expectations for what it would accomplish. The Board of Visitors initially entrusted five faculty members, all African American, with carrying out the school’s mission of

⁴² “Normal School,” *Richmond Daily Whig* 15 February 1882; R. L. Mitchell, “The Colored Normal and Collegiate Institute,” *The People’s Advocate* 25 March 1882.

⁴³ “Normal School,” *Richmond Daily Whig* 15 February 1882; Toppin, *Loyal Sons and Daughters*, 13.

educating a new generation of black leaders. Professor James Storum served both as an instructor and as the school's first principal. Originally from Washington, D.C., Storum earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Oberlin College. Virginians knew him for his thought-provoking public lectures on politics, the social economy, and education.⁴⁴ Fearlessly, he spoke out against racial violence and offered visions of a better future. In one particularly publicized instance, he argued against a prejudicial report written by W. N. Armstrong blaming blacks for political instability in the South. "If Mr. Armstrong knows anything about the 'Solid South,' he is aware that it is possible only when Ku Klux Klans, Rifle Clubs, White Liner and Regulators...assassinate men, women and children," he wrote. "The only hope for the country is to be found in educating the people."⁴⁵

Storum's scholarly standing and his determination to defend black public interests made him a strong choice for the principalship, even though Virginia Normal's faculty included similarly well-educated men and women. For instance, Reverend William H. Smith and Professor D. N. Vassar graduated from Richmond Institute and New York's Madison College, respectively. Ida R. Morris, a young teacher from Alexandria, served as the school's assistant principal, and Hampton Institute alumnus Sallie P. Gregory was well equipped to offer instruction in the normal department. Within a year, Dartmouth

⁴⁴ "Co-operation," *The People's Advocate* 25 December 1880.

⁴⁵ "Another Aspect of the Negro Question, A Reply to A. N. [sic] Armstrong," *The People's Advocate* 10 April 1880. William Nevins Armstrong was a Yale alumnus, a prominent New York attorney, and a public officeholder in Hawaii. Interestingly, he was the older brother of Samuel Chapman Armstrong, founder of Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute.

graduate James M. Colson and Lincoln University graduate John J. Carter had joined the faculty.⁴⁶

Hiring these able teachers was about more than dealing out political patronage; the school's visionaries needed to put the institution in a position to thrive. Within a few years, Virginia Normal's enrollment tripled, and in June 1886, the first eight students—four men and four women—participated in commencement exercises, having graduated from the two-year normal program. Among them was Carrie Bragg, younger sister to journalist George F. Bragg, Jr. Although some alumni of the Institute left Virginia to seek employment, it was also common to stay on as an instructor, as Miss Bragg did after graduation. Board members such as Alfred Harris did not want the school to produce only future teachers, but there was certainly a widespread expectation that these Institute graduates would give back to their communities. The original bill approved by the Assembly included a provision that the Board of Visitors would grant fifty State Students free tuition in exchange for a two-year commitment to teach in Virginia's public schools. With the estimated yearly cost of attending the Institute initially set at sixty dollars per student, offering in-state student status helped make higher education an option for many more Afro-Virginians.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ On Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute's early faculty, see meeting dated 22 August 1883 in Board of Visitors Minutes, University Archives, Virginia State University Special Collections; "Fourteenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the year ending July 31, 1884," *Virginia School Report*, Appendix; Toppin, *Loyal Sons and Daughters*, chapter 2; "The Old Dominion," *The New York Globe* 8 September 1883.

⁴⁷ Toppin, *Loyal Sons and Daughters*, chapter 2; Catalogue, Virginia State College for Negroes: 1885-1886 through 1899-1900; Catalogue of the Virginia Normal & Collegiate Institute for the year 1887-8; Minute Book 1: 1885-1895, Faculty Minute Book, Nov. 1885-Jan. 1930, University Archives, Virginia State University Special Collections; Chapter 266, article 14 in *Acts and Joint Resolutions passed by the General Assembly, 1881-82*, 286.

Readjuster Virginia provided the setting for numerous other gains in public institution-building for blacks, not all of which occurred within the realm of education. For instance, in the same session of the General Assembly where Harris proposed incorporating the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute, another prominent black Readjuster advocated the establishment of a permanent lunatic asylum for blacks, run by blacks. William N. Stevens was born free in Petersburg in 1850. A lawyer by training, he represented Sussex County in the Virginia Senate from 1871 to 1878. In 1876, the Republican State Convention elected Stevens to represent Virginia at the next National Republican Convention, along with Peter J. Carter and a number of other respected black and white men.⁴⁸ Like Carter, Stevens came to see the Readjusters were serious about promoting black interests, and it was as a Readjuster that he again joined the State Senate in 1881, one of three black senators elected for the 1881-1882 cycle. Stevens was able to use his coalitionist affiliations to build support for the permanent establishment of Central Lunatic Asylum in Petersburg, now called Central State Hospital.

The question of what to do with Virginia's black mental health patients in the post-Emancipation era was not new to the state legislature. In 1869, overcrowding in the state's two public asylums led military governor, General Canby, to begin transferring black patients to Howard's Grove Hospital, a former Confederate facility outside Richmond. White Virginians praised this decision to provide professional treatment for the "colored lunatics," insisting that "Cleanliness, nourishing food, and active employment of the body, are the surest remedies, and these cannot be resorted to in

⁴⁸ Moore, *Two Paths to the New South*, Appendix C; "The Proceedings of the Republican State Convention at Lynchburg, Va.," *The People's Advocate* 22 April 1876.

county prisons.”⁴⁹ The legislation of 1870 incorporating the facility as Central Lunatic Asylum, specifically for the treatment of Virginia’s black mental health patients, cited Howard’s Grove as only a temporary location. After all, the hospital had no dining facility, no sewage system, and little light. Yet more than a decade later, patients were still suffering from the inadequate conditions.⁵⁰

In 1879, the State Senate passed a bill condemning the land used by the Central Lunatic Asylum. Finally, on March 6, 1882, the Readjuster-led Assembly approved Stevens’s bill to provide a permanent location for the hospital in Petersburg. By September of the same year, the hospital’s Board of Directors filed a deed with Dinwiddie County Court’s Clerk’s Office for Maysfield Farm, a 284-acre tract upon which they would construct a new facility worth up to one hundred thousand dollars.⁵¹ Petersburg, a Readjuster stronghold, was well-suited to be the site of both major black institutions established during the movement. Located in the heavily black Southside of Virginia, it was the state’s largest majority-black city as well as home to several prominent party members of either race, including William Mahone, Governor William Cameron, and Alfred Harris.

Unlike the act to incorporate Virginia Normal, Stevens’s bill for Central Lunatic Asylum did not specifically require black operational control. The officers and directors were simply meant to be competent people from across the state. However, the

⁴⁹ *Richmond Dispatch* 4 December 1869.

⁵⁰ “Act incorporating the Central Lunatic Asylum” in Central Lunatic Asylum Annual Report, 1870/71-1878/79, Library of Virginia; “Biographical/Historical Information,” A Guide to the Records of Central State Hospital, 1874-1961, Virginia Heritage; “General Assembly,” *Richmond State* 31 January 1879.

⁵¹ Chapter 245 in *Acts and Joint Resolutions, 1881-82*, 246-8; Records of Central State Hospital, Series IV: Deeds and Leases, 1882-1942, Box 109, Folder 11, Library of Virginia.

Readjuster government named two well-respected black physicians, Dr. John C. Ferguson and Dr. R. F. Tancil, as the hospital's first and second assistant physicians, respectively. For the next 80 years, until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the hospital served as the only refuge for Virginia's African American mental health patients.⁵²

Still, of all the black institutions, public schools garnered the most media attention and stirred the most controversy. Between 1879 and 1883, the number of black schools, black teachers, and black principals in Virginia all nearly tripled. Dedicated activism in local communities contributed significantly to these improvements. Afro-Virginians formed citizens' committees, wrote editorials, petitioned local school boards, and requested the support of Readjuster Party leaders. During the summer of 1882 in Petersburg, African American citizens raged against the predominantly Funder city school board when it overturned the superintendent's nominations of black teachers for black schools. A group of concerned black citizens wrote a letter to the Petersburg City School Board, demanding the removal of white teachers from black public schools. Their arguments again revealed fear of prejudicial indoctrination, as they wrote, "It must appear to you that a white person, who by birth, education and breeding has always felt that the negro was intellectually, morally and socially inferior, is not the person to be put in charge of the intellectual and moral training of the children of that race."⁵³

Relying on a new law that required state officeholders to take an oath recognizing the civil and political equality of all men before the law, Readjuster Governor Cameron

⁵² Secretary of the Commonwealth, Series VII: Records of various state institutions and asylums, 1870-1897, Box 7, Folder 1; Central Lunatic Asylum Annual Report, 1881-82; Bragg, Letter to Carter G. Woodson, 27 July 1926, *The Journal of Negro History*, 673; "Biographical/Historical Information," A Guide to the Records of Central State Hospital, Virginia Heritage.

⁵³ "Our Colored Public Schools," *Petersburg Lancet* 1 July 1882; "Letter to the Petersburg City School Board by committee appointed by colored citizens," *Petersburg Lancet* 15 July 1882.

declared the school board vacant on August 9. He instructed Dinwiddie County superintendent E. B. Branch to replace the Petersburg School Board with one willing to employ black teachers. The new board, which included three black men, dismissed one-fourth of Petersburg's white teachers and rewarded two black Readjusters with coveted positions as principals. Alfred S. Pryor took command of the Peabody School, while William L. Hamlin began his tenure at the Jones Street School. Both men led faculties composed entirely of black teachers.⁵⁴

The city's black newspapers celebrated with triumphant headlines, and other school systems soon followed Petersburg's example. When Governor Cameron declared Richmond's school board also vacant, two black men joined the new group of board members. James Hugo Johnston, James H. Hayes, and A. V. Norrell, named principals by the newly-appointed Richmond School Board, all benefited from the Readjusters' aggressive campaign to increase blacks' control of their schools. By December 1882, there were all-black faculties in the black public schools of Lynchburg, Norfolk, Hampton, Danville, Charlottesville, and many smaller towns throughout Virginia. Reports indicated that the schools with black teachers showed improvements in the areas of student attendance, scholarship, and behavior.⁵⁵

Historian Howard Rabinowitz traces this shift from white teachers to black teachers in black schools throughout the South, especially in urban centers like Atlanta,

⁵⁴ Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 75. The three black men appointed to the Petersburg School Board were Captain James E. Hill of the Flipper Guards, Captain W. F. Jackson of the Petersburg Guards, and William J. Smith, a merchant. George F. Bragg, Jr., Letter to A. A. Taylor, 8 July 1926, *The Journal of Negro History*, 672.

⁵⁵ "We Won," *Petersburg Lancet* 19 August 1882; Bragg, Letter to A. A. Taylor, 672; Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*; Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 75-76; "Colored Teachers in Colored Schools," *The Virginia Star* 9 December 1882.

Nashville, and Richmond. He identifies several phases of change among educators of blacks, the dominant group of whom were initially northerners traveling south as representatives of missionary societies. Southern whites unable to win positions in the white schools later replaced northerners, and eventually they in turn were succeeded by black teachers. The battle for educational self-determination extended far beyond the boundaries of one state or one election cycle. In cities across the South throughout the 1880s, African Americans themselves “forced this change.” However, Afro-Virginians were the first to force wide-sweeping change that included not only black teachers for black schools but black principals as well.⁵⁶ By shaping the Readjuster Party platform to their purpose, Afro-Virginians seized an opportunity to exert public, political influence in a way that had not been done since Reconstruction.

Of course, the post-emancipation movement for self-determination in public schools was not without its disadvantages. Historian Adam Fairclough makes the point that segregation made it easy for school boards to ignore black public schools suffering from inadequate materials or incompetent teachers, particularly as the political climate became more antagonistic toward African Americans.⁵⁷ Thus, the normal school movement, of which the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute was a notable expression, became a significant part of training black teachers. This model for black higher education was epitomized by another Virginia school, the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, founded in 1868 by Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a northerner and former Union officer. The curriculum placed a heavy emphasis on teacher training, did

⁵⁶ Rabinowitz, “Half a Loaf: The Shift from White to Black Teachers in the Negro Schools of the Urban South, 1865-1890,” 565-66, 586-87.

⁵⁷ Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, chapter 2.

not offer a bachelor's degree, and did not require the completion of secondary school for admission. Out of the 723 graduates of Hampton's first twenty classes, eighty-four percent became teachers.⁵⁸ Virginia Normal offered similar training for developing teachers. The initial course of study proposed by the Institute's Board of Visitors featured a number of courses dedicated to the methods and practice of teaching. In addition, every summer from 1884 to 1899, the school ran teacher institutes to improve the skills of current professionals.⁵⁹

However, Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute differed from Hampton Institute in two major ways. First, Virginia Normal offered a four-year bachelor's program in addition to its teacher training, departing from the industrial education model supported by Armstrong and, more famously, by Booker T. Washington, a graduate of Hampton Institute who founded Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama in 1881. There were other important bodies in America at the time that did support the inclusion of a classic liberal arts curriculum in black schools. Notably, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, founded in 1854, exemplified the idea that blacks could excel at the highest levels of education. Even in the face of pressure from private donors throughout the late nineteenth century, Lincoln's leaders, including long-time university president Isaac N. Rendall, refused to adopt the industrial education model.⁶⁰ As Rendall believed, "To withhold the means of liberal education...will arouse the suspicion that we design to

⁵⁸ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 33-35.

⁵⁹ Meeting dated 22 March 1883 in Board of Visitors Minutes, University Archives, Virginia State University Special Collections; Catalogue, Virginia State College for Negroes: 1885-1886 through 1899-1900.

⁶⁰ Unlike Virginia State University, though, Lincoln was founded and initially run by northern, white Presbyterians, including Isaac Norton "Pap" Rendall, who served as its president from 1865-1905. See Horace Mann Bond's *Education for Freedom: A History of Lincoln University, Pennsylvania* (Lincoln University: Lincoln University, 1976).

keep them [African Americans] in an inferior position by fitting them for an inferior place.”⁶¹ Later, social scientist W. E. B. Du Bois would focus on the inspirational messages the next generation of black leaders received from liberal arts curricula, arguing that “the greater the ideal these graduates have had set before them, the greater the work that they will do.”⁶²

The second significant difference between Hampton Institute and Virginia Normal was the status of the latter as a public institution, the first fully state-supported four-year college for blacks in America. Although the motives driving private white philanthropy were often mixed, historians have also noted the dangers of public institution-building in the post-Emancipation South. They argue that blacks in public institutions, being dependent on appropriations from white politicians, felt pressured to practice accommodation, limiting their demands for equality. Fairclough writes, “Dependency made teachers vulnerable to manipulation by whites. Politicians expected black teachers to discourage militancy or radicalism.”⁶³ The early history of Virginia Normal supports this idea—but only after the Readjusters lost control of the state in 1883. In 1902, the Virginia legislature revised the school’s charter to remove its vanguard collegiate program. Though that curriculum was restored in 1923, the prejudicial changes revealed one of the threats facing public institutions for blacks in the South—and throw into sharp relief the progressive nature of the biracial Readjuster coalition.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Quoted in Bond, *Education for Freedom*, 406.

⁶² W. S. Scarborough, “The Negro and Higher Learning,” *Forum* 33.3 (May 1902): 349-355, American Periodicals Series Online, 353.

⁶³ Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 15.

⁶⁴ For information on legislative changes made to the school throughout the twentieth century, see “History,” Virginia State University, 2011, <http://www.vsu.edu/pages/749.asp>.

Another potential concern for African Americans was the fact that Virginia Normal's public status made its funding subject to legislative approval. If the Readjusters did not remain in power, there could be no guarantee that the state would continue to support the school in the future. During the 1881-82 session of the House of Delegates, Alfred Harris insisted that the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute should receive appropriations comparable to other state educational institutions. He reminded his fellow delegates "that we have nearly one-half of the school population of the State, and that there are now the University of Virginia, the Virginia Military Institute, and various schools for the education of the whites, all of which receive large annuities from the State—and while we are not asking admission to these schools—we think that you should give us this appropriation..."⁶⁵ The twenty thousand dollar annuity awarded to Virginia Normal still fell below the forty thousand given annually to the University of Virginia and the thirty thousand given to the Virginia Military Institute, but it made the black college a significant public investment among all the state's expenditures.⁶⁶ However, the Democrats eventually ended this relatively salutary level of funding after they regained control of the state government. By 1896, Virginia had raised the annual appropriations for many of its colleges for white students, while the annuity for Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute dropped to fifteen thousand dollars.⁶⁷ Given the pitfalls of maintaining public institutions in a culture of white supremacy, how could black Readjusters ensure their achievements would last?

⁶⁵ "Normal School," *Richmond Daily Whig* 15 February 1882.

⁶⁶ Chapter 470 in *Acts and Joint Resolutions passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia during the session of 1885-86*, 528-38.

⁶⁷ Chapter 575 in *Acts and Joint Resolutions passed by the General Assembly of the State of Virginia during the session of 1895-96*, 612-13.

First, it is possible that black Readjusters believed in the abiding strength of the coalition government and saw it as the way of the future. Although it is difficult to distinguish the political rhetoric of the time from what people actually thought about the longevity of the Readjuster Party, there is some evidence that African Americans believed the movement would have a lasting impact on Virginia and the South as a whole. Public discourse featured ideas about how the Readjusters' success set a new tone for state politics and how it might inspire similar radical action in other parts of the former Confederacy. One article boldly predicted, "The success of Cameron in Virginia means the redemption of other Southern States next year, and several electoral votes for our cause in 1884." Later, Cromwell argued that Readjuster success indicated "a complete 'giving way' to an irresistible sentiment against Bourbonism."⁶⁸ One should not simply dismiss this as naïve thinking, either, for it turned out that the changes effected by Readjusters would never be completely undone. When Conservatives regained power in Virginia, they did not shut down the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute. They did not re-establish the whipping post, the head tax, or white faculties in black schools. People, both black and white, sensed that Virginia was in some ways changed forever. Readjusters proved that even without federal military enforcement, southern blacks and whites could find common ground on issues like a free ballot box and equal access to public education.

Second, the public institution-building advocated under Readjuster rule reflected the increased number of black office-holders. A total of sixteen black legislators served in

⁶⁸ *The People's Advocate* 5 November 1881; "The New South," *The People's Advocate* 14 January 1882. See also: "Mahone," *The Conservator* 8 September 1883.

the 1881-1882 session of the General Assembly. With the establishment of new state institutions, changes in black public schools, repeal of the poll tax, and inclusion of blacks on juries, the Readjuster period constituted what historian James Tice Moore calls a “civil rights revolution.”⁶⁹ Black Readjusters would naturally want to use their newfound political influence to promote their constituents’ goals.

Moreover, black Readjusters’ commitment to public institution-building for black communities served as a visible expression of citizenship and civic participation. Under the Freedmen’s Bureau, “education was understood as a means through which freed slaves could become employable, providing them with the skills necessary to assess the value of contracts, to negotiate with potential employers, and to form a southern counterpart to the expanding northern capitalist economy.” But, since emancipation, blacks and their allies had also come to believe that black education and a common school system could accomplish much more than this—that it “would guarantee black rights, challenge elitism, and promote the reintegration of the South into the nation.” Thus, education became both a symbol of citizenship and a practical safeguard against political manipulation; educated voters would be better equipped to defend their interests and preserve the gains they made under Readjuster rule.⁷⁰

What the black Readjusters hoped to accomplish by promoting racial equality constituted a radical vision. Yet, remarkably, they seemed to know when to push the party and when to appease its less radical elements. One example of the former is public

⁶⁹ Moore, *Two Paths to the New South*, 103.

⁷⁰ On the links between citizenship, civil rights and education, see Anderson’s *The Education of Blacks in the South*, and Dailey’s *Before Jim Crow*. First quotation from E. Allen Richardson, “Architects of a Benevolent Empire,” in Paul Cimbala, ed., *The Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction*, 125. Second quotation from William A. Link, *A Hard Country and a Lonely Place: Schooling, Society, and Reform in Rural Virginia, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 8.

education; because this was one of the issues around which the coalition had originally formed, black Readjusters could aggressively demand reform in that area.

Leading the party in its support for public education regardless of the population being served was William Mahone himself. At the height of the Readjusters' political influence, he received voluminous correspondence on a daily basis, and often he was able to respond with only a few lines. However, on June 27, 1883, Mahone wrote Alfred Harris a multi-page letter responding to an invitation to participate in the cornerstone-laying ceremonies for Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute. In it, he explained that he hoped his presence would show his approval of the "enlightened policy" that had led the legislature to incorporate the school. He continued his praise for the institution in his final paragraph, writing that Virginia Normal "marks the march of civilization and the steady growth of a progress, which recognizes the value of education as the surest foundation for better citizenship and a higher performance of duty to God, society and country."

Whatever his deepest feelings may have been towards black political participation and institution-building, Mahone's letter reveals the attention he paid to prominent black Readjusters, as well as the importance of widespread access to public education in the party platform. Development of black-run institutions was clearly an area in which blacks could hope to agitate successfully for change within the Readjuster movement.⁷¹

In her work on the Readjusters, Jane Dailey argues that the party leaders relied on a distinct form of Southern liberalism that allowed them to placate whites who remained conservative on issues of race by maintaining the color line in their private lives. In this

⁷¹ Letterbooks, Volume 42: 1883 June 16-1883 July 13, William Mahone Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, 195-6.

case, “liberalism” was a political philosophy and language advocating only that justice and equality exist in public spheres.⁷² Like the white party bosses, black Readjusters, too, used rhetorical strategies to make their proposals more palatable to their allies. They often managed to disguise their radical ideology with language that played into some white Readjusters’ narrow commitment to separate spheres. For example, when Alfred Harris stood before the General Assembly to deliver his rebuttal to the conservative Delegate Skinner, he began by pointing out the inherent contradictions of the segregationist system. He said, “I wonder that his own inconsistency does not strike him as a little peculiar, for he says that ‘he approves of the clause which makes this a school for the exclusive education of colored persons,’ and yet he desires to mix the races to the extent of putting white teachers in colored schools.”⁷³ Other black Readjusters sometimes went so far as to proclaim their own race’s inferior position. In one 1883 political broadside, the authors recommended that their fellow blacks vote the Readjuster ticket, insisting “we are not as intelligent, nor as strong, financially, as any other people. We are just out of slavery; we are struggling upward; we need friends.”⁷⁴

At other times, however, having an all-black audience allowed black Readjusters to include more prideful, radical language. A writer whose letter appeared in the black Petersburg *Lancet* had these words to say about Virginia Normal: “This Institute shows

⁷² Jane Dailey, “The Limits of Liberalism in the New South: The Politics of Race, Sex, and Patronage in Virginia, 1879-1883,” in *Jumpin’ Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, ed. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Bryant Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 88-89.

⁷³ “Normal School,” *Richmond Daily Whig* 15 February 1882.

⁷⁴ “An Address to the Colored Voters of the State of Virginia: The record of the Bourbon-Democratic and Liberal-Readjuster Parties contrasted—What the Leading, Most Influential, Intelligent and Representative Colored Men of Virginia have to say to their People,” General William Mahone Scrap Book (1883), Box 216, William Mahone Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

one thing which our white citizens have not been willing to admit, that is, that the negro in acquirements, in ability to use properly, the modern appliances in the school room is well up to his white co-laborer.”⁷⁵ The black population in Virginia was far from being a monolithic group, but these glimpses of radicalism suggest that at least a portion of the accommodationist rhetoric used was designed to cultivate white audiences. Blacks understood that the Readjuster Party needed their support and thus could not ignore their goals. They took full advantage of an opportunity to influence major institutional change while trying to downplay their radicalism with tempered rhetoric.

When the Readjusters were defeated in the elections of 1883, amid racial hostility and accusations of voter fraud, it was inevitable that some of their radical reforms would be reversed. Many of the retreats occurred gradually. For instance, Virginia Normal’s Board of Visitors remained predominantly black throughout the 1880s, even after the terms of the original members ended. Black appointees in the second half of the decade included Daniel Norton’s brother, Robert, who had represented Elizabeth City and York County in the House of Delegates from 1869 to 1882; prominent Readjuster Armistead Green, a prosperous landholder and state legislator from Petersburg; Reverend Thomas W. Cain of Richmond; and respected Louisa County grocer Lazarus Bibb.⁷⁶ Little by little, however, radical office-holders were removed from their positions, blacks found it increasingly difficult to exercise their right to vote, and public institutions for blacks suffered from conservative white supervision. By 1891, the Virginia Normal and

⁷⁵ “Teachers’ Institute,” *Petersburg Lancet* 12 August 1882

⁷⁶ *Virginia School Report*, 1885; Catalogue of the Virginia Normal & Collegiate Institute, 1887-8 and 1888-9; Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders in Virginia*, 18, 30; Thomas W. Cain, 1880 U.S. Census, Henrico, Virginia, series T9, roll 1372, page 467, Heritage Quest Online; Lazarus Bibb, 1880 U.S. Census, Louisa, Virginia, series T9, roll 1376, page 119, Heritage Quest Online.

Collegiate Institute had a nearly all-white Board of Visitors in charge of its operations, and it was only a matter of time before the legislature reduced state funding and altered the school's charter to halt its bachelor's degree program.⁷⁷

But Virginia certainly could not erase everything the Readjusters had achieved. In 1888, the state elected its first black representative in the U.S. Congress (and, as things turned out, its last for nearly a century to come). John Mercer Langston, a staunch Republican, had dedicated his life to serving African American interests in politics and education. After graduating from Oberlin, he helped establish Howard University's Law School, represented the U.S. as its Minister to Haiti, and, in 1886, became the first official president of the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute. Although the Readjuster Party did not support his congressional candidacy, most Afro-Virginians lauded his accomplishments.⁷⁸ The memory of black involvement in the Readjusters' triumph over Conservatism was still fresh for all Virginians, so despite Langston's personal party affiliations, it is difficult to imagine divorcing his political success from the Readjusters' legacy.

In 1889, years after Democrats had regained control of the state, the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute consummated another part of the Readjuster legacy when it awarded its first bachelor's degree to Walter Fayerman of Petersburg. At fifteen years old, Fayerman had made the trek out to Fleets Farm on that historic opening day in 1883 to attend the Institute's college preparatory program. He moved on to the four-year

⁷⁷ The Board of Visitors members listed in the 1891-2 Virginia State University Catalogue were matched in the 1880 U.S. Census via Heritage Quest Online.

⁷⁸ Toppin, *Loyal Sons and Daughters*, 19; "Mr. Douglass' Letter," *Richmond Planet* 25 August 1888.

collegiate program in 1886 but finished the coursework before any of his classmates.⁷⁹

After graduation, he went on to study medicine.

Today, Virginia State University graduates over 600 men and women every year, many of whom go on to pursue advanced degrees or challenging careers in fields ranging from engineering to philosophy.⁸⁰ For Fayerman and the thousands of alumni who have come after him, the Readjusters were more than just a failed political movement. Through their commitment to institution-building under Readjuster rule, blacks attained a significant degree of self-determination and helped alter the landscape of post-Reconstruction Virginia.

Ultimately, former Virginia State University President Wesley McClure could have been describing the Readjuster Party itself when he said that Virginia Normal represented “a bold promise that would achieve more than its detractors were capable of imagining.”⁸¹ The Readjusters promised a state government based on the democratic ideals of fair and open participation. They pledged to govern on behalf of those citizens concerned about regressive taxes and the fate of public services. And, at a time when many other states’ progressive movements had been or were being squeezed out by repressive Redeemer regimes, the Readjusters triumphed—for a time—and delivered. Black Virginians were astute enough to recognize the significance of the moment, and just twenty years after the end of slavery, they too delivered.

⁷⁹ The school did not accept anyone into its bachelor’s program until 1886, recognizing that most incoming students were not ready for the rigor of collegiate courses. Instead, Virginia Normal funneled students into the preparatory or normal program first. Toppin, *Loyal Sons and Daughters*, 21.

⁸⁰ “Facts & Quick Charts: Graduation,” Virginia State University, 2011, <http://www.vsu.edu/pages/611.asp>.

⁸¹ Former Virginia State University President Wesley Cornelious McClure in 1992 preface to Toppin’s *Loyal Sons and Daughters*, viii.

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