

Democracy's Incursion into the Eastern Shore: The 1870 Election in Chestertown

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The ratification in 1870 of the Fifteenth Amendment, which extended the franchise to all citizens regardless of race, opened the door for the entrance of black men into the political arena in Maryland. Beginning in the spring, Republicans worked diligently throughout the Eastern Shore of Maryland to promote festive celebrations of the Fifteenth Amendment. With uncanny efficiency, the party of Lincoln also turned its attention toward registering the newly eligible voters. Attracting blacks as voters, although not as political office holders, was to become the core of the Republicans' hope to turn the political tide in Maryland.

Blacks and whites who were suddenly working together to extend a newly enacted right to Maryland's disenfranchised minority did so, no doubt, in a revolutionary spirit. A fundamental step toward a truer democracy was at hand. Although, to be sure, women were given no place in the American political system, for the first time since the turn of the nineteenth century black men were returning to the political process, and this time in significant numbers. Not only did this fulfill a long-held ideological dream, it also had profound implications concerning the distribution of fundamental political power. A new day had dawned and the black and white Republicans of Maryland were positioned to reap its advantages.

By late January, 1870 in Chestertown, then the Shore's most prosperous town, Democratic party members were coming to accept the inevitable. Although Maryland had refused to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment, three-quarters of the states finally had consented to this expansion of the franchise to the border states, and soon thereafter the constitutional enactment would officially be proclaimed.¹ The Chestertown *Transcript's* comment on the new constitutional mandate was blunt: the "so-called amendment . . . had been forcibly and illegally obtained." Nevertheless, it urged its readers, Maryland must swallow hard and accept this measure, or else a far worse fate lay ahead: major federal interference "in the domestic affairs of our State."²

To the *Transcript*, the scheme of the Radicals was, indeed, to bait the Democrats into such protest that Congress would intervene. Feeling that the state was already living under a "semi-military [federal] government," it sighed in relief when the

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Democratic State Committee voted not to oppose enforcement of the Amendment. When the Democratically controlled General Assembly followed suit, wise counsel prevailed and "the danger of armed Federal intervention had been averted."³

Democrats then turned their attention to how they should deal with the presently enfranchised. The *Transcript* initially reacted to this new political arrangement by urging that the black vote be courted. No blame should be laid at the black man's door for the new federal command. Only the Republicans should be castigated. It predicted that the black citizens would exert their independence and "feel perfectly free to act for the best interests of their race," which, it suggested, could be for Democratic as well as Republican candidates.⁴

On 31 March 1870 the official news came to Maryland: President Ulysses S. Grant announced the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Hereafter, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by . . . any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." On Saturday afternoon, two days later, Governor Oden Bowie sent a veto message to the General Assembly refusing to sign a bill that incorporated the town of Chestertown and limited its franchise to white men. Anxious to keep federal election supervisors at bay, the Governor pointed to the Fifteenth Amendment as compelling his action. The clear import of federal command had thus been sounded in the State.⁵

The passage of two more days brought the first election in Maryland to take place under this more democratic regime. On the Western Shore, on that early morning of 4 April, William Taylor appears to have become the first black person to vote in Maryland since the early years of the century. Taylor and twenty-six of his black colleagues cast their ballots at a peaceful and otherwise uneventful election for the commissioners of newly incorporated Towsontown, in Baltimore County.⁶ This pattern repeated itself in the next few weeks in other Western Shore locales such as Hagerstown, Upper Marlboro, Laurel, and Westminster.⁷

On that same day on the Eastern Shore, however, would-be black voters experienced a contrary result. At Salisbury's town election, local election officials thwarted the attempts of several black men to vote. Lack of appropriate registration was given as the reason for these actions. Because blacks had not been entitled to vote before, no preparations had been made in Salisbury to permit their registration. The Salisbury election registrars, unlike those in Towsontown, failed to accommodate this understandable omission. A small group of pioneers of post-Civil War voting thus once again met successful resistance to changes in the Shore's way of life.⁸

The voting results in Towsontown, however, indicated that the newly enfranchised would be siding with the Republican cause; they had helped propel the full Republican slate into office. Sensing the futility of Democrats seeking out the black vote, the *Transcript* righted its course and adopted the advice of the *Statesman*:

We are no advocate for masterly inactivity now, but on the contrary, for the most active and zealous campaign, not to divide the negro vote, but to bring

out the entire white vote, and show by overwhelming majorities at the next election, that we do not mean to give up the State to the Radicals⁹

With this quick turnaround, the Democrats became the "White Man's Party."

The Towsontown/Salisbury divergence reoccurred in later local elections that spring. On 5 April, the day after the Salisbury election, St. Michael's hosted the Shore's second election under the Fifteenth Amendment. Despite comprising one-quarter of the town's population, blacks were fully shut out of the process. The *Easton Star* happily reported that the "election was untrammelled by the fifteenth amendment—no negroes offered to vote."¹⁰

The 2,110 persons residing in Easton in 1870 made it the biggest town on the Shore. It also had a sizeable black constituency, 43.2 percent. Easton's local election was held on 2 May, well after word had reached the Shore of the new Amendment's arrival. Nevertheless, no black is reported to have voted in this Talbot County election. In language that signaled a determined battle for continued white domination, the *Easton Star* gloated that "Africa did not make his appearance on the field of action."¹¹

Not until 23 May 1870 did some blacks within the traditional confines of the Eastern Shore finally exercise their rights under the Fifteenth Amendment. The historic Chestertown commissioner election not only witnessed the Shore's first black voters, but these voters came to the polls in such numbers that they dictated the election result. The political power of the newly enfranchised stormed in like a lion.

The setting for this historic event was the Shore's wealthiest town, comprised of slightly under two thousand residents. Situated on the stately shore of the Chester River, Chestertown made a profound initial impression. As one Northern visitor described it in 1871:

The broad, main street of Chestertown suggests the entrance to some ancient capital. Its venerable mansions, many of them in excellent preservation—its bank, court-house, hotel, and churches—would be disappointing if the corn fields succeeded them on the other side; but, instead, there is the broad expanse of Chester River, bordered by gardens and stately homes. . . . I could have believed myself in England, there was such an air of antique comfort and order about the place.¹²

Chestertown's black community in 1870 totalled 808 persons, over 43 percent of the town's population. The great majority worked in a status not too different than that before the war; they were primarily unskilled farm hands and domestic servants. The more affluent served as carters, barbers, sailors, and farmers. James Jones, the town's elder activist, was its prominent black grocer and landowner. His \$4,000 in real property consisted primarily of several homes he rented to other black residents. The town's second wealthiest black citizen was Perry Chambers, like Jones in his late sixties, who farmed and was assessed as owning \$6,800 in property. In contrast to

Jones, who for decades had been a community leader in the black man's quest for freedom, Chambers was a moderate, more trusted by the white community.¹³

Chestertown's William Perkins, this era's most prominent black man on the Shore, stood as the unquestioned leader of Kent County African Americans. The owner of the Rising Sun Saloon on Bridge Street, Perkins's net worth was \$10,000, making him one of the Shore's wealthiest blacks. For twenty years he had been an outspoken leader of black causes. In the next few years he would become the first black Maryland delegate to a national Republican convention and the shore's first black federal grand juror.¹⁴

Despite this scattering of "middle class" leaders, the black community posed no economic match for the dominant white hierarchy. To the white men fell the positions of community power: they owned the area's most successful farms, served as the town's predominant landlords, and enjoyed the cash flow of the downtown stores. They were the lawyers, bankers, public office holders, and inheritors of wealth. George Wescott, a stalwart Republican, was by far the richest man in Kent County with \$315,000 in real and personal assets. He alone was worth more than all the black residents of the county combined. Wescott controlled much of the activities in the county from his position as president the First National Bank and ownership of over 3,400 acres of farmland, far more than anyone else in Kent.

A list of Chestertown's ten wealthiest white residents also included two lawyers, two merchants, a widow, a judge and a chemist. Their combined wealth tallied \$1,362,800. The combined assets of the ten wealthiest black residents totalled only \$32,960. In a community where the ten wealthiest whites averaged over \$130,000 in assets, with the comparable blacks averaging just \$3,300, a near forty-fold difference, little doubt could be had as to where the economic leverage resided.¹⁵

Many of these wealthier white citizens were Republicans. In the six weeks after Governor Bowie struck the "whites only" qualification from the Chestertown code, black leaders and these white Republicans addressed the task of organizing this new assembly of voters. Their efforts paid off with near perfect results. They developed in the black community a remarkable sense of patriotism and citizenship: nearly each eligible black voter came to the polls.

This success did not come about without planning. In mid-April a large gathering assembled in the town's main black church, Janes United Methodist, to rally black residents around the Republican cause. The main speaker was the white Baltimore Republican, Hugh Lennox Bond, who soon would sit on the United States Court of Appeals. Bond, working with William Perkins, was a major factor in raising the funds for most of the Shore's schools for blacks. He also had distinguished himself in his unsuccessful bid for the governorship in 1867 by preaching the cause of black progress to an electorate in which blacks could not yet vote. His remarks at Janes focused on his favorite theme: the need for the formerly enslaved class to attain the education necessary to future success in the white-dominated society. Gen. R. Clay Crawford also spoke at this Republican rally.¹⁶

Less than a week before the election, three thousand black residents from all over Kent County converged on their county seat in celebration of the Fifteenth Amend-

ment. Dressed in their finest attire, men, women, and children began assembling throughout Chestertown as early as 8:00 A.M. As by now could be expected, William Perkins was at the forefront as the event's organizer. He was aided by his long-time companions, James A. Jones, Richard S. Jones, Levi Rodgers, and James Sprigg. Their unstinting efforts produced a model of efficient, political organization.¹⁷

Even the normally hostile Chestertown *Transcript* offered a positive, festive picture of the distinctive event:

The military, societies, wagons, carriages and horsemen, with banners spread to the breeze, flags flying, and enlivened by the music of drums and fifes and two excellent colored brass bands, paraded the principal streets about noon.

Upon full assembly all paraded to a grove south of town near Baker's schoolhouse. At two in the afternoon the speakers began. Most prominent among them were General Crawford and the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet.

Garnet, a former Kent County slave who escaped north and became a nationally recognized abolitionist orator, had returned home for this event. The slave trade had brought his grandfather, a Mandingo chieftain in West Africa, to Maryland. Garnet was born of slave parents in 1815 in New Market, Kent County. After leaving the Shore, he became a prolific writer and speaker for a broad array of issues including slave rebellion, temperance, land reform, women's rights, enfranchisement, and colonization. Although the latter stance raised eyebrows among his abolitionist colleagues, he declared that he "would rather see a man free in Liberia than a slave in the United States." The first black man to deliver a sermon to Congress, Garnet was later the United States Minister to Liberia, where he died in 1882.¹⁸

Soon after the end of the war, Crawford, a Tennessee native with a New England wife, had caused quite a stir with his swashbuckling ways in staid Chestertown. Purporting to have risen to the rank of general in service to the Union, Crawford, a chemist who marketed "Black Chesapeake Ink," set his assets at over \$200,000, making him the second wealthiest man in the town. As befit such a position, he immediately moved into one of the prime properties along the river, the home at the end of High Street once owned by Judge Ezekiel F. Chambers. The flamboyant intruder soon evoked the ire of the local white majority by founding a radical newspaper, the *Freedman's Journal*, staffed by blacks, that even a century later was recalled by a local white historian as including "reckless political utterances and violent editorials."¹⁹

After a full day of picnicking and speeches by Garnet, Crawford and others, at sundown the procession headed back to town. The proceedings were carried off with dignity and no disruptions. As the *Baltimore American* gushed: "No similar celebration was ever witnessed in Chestertown. In respectability of numbers, manliness of deportment, neatness of dress and citizen-like bearing, they challenged the admiration and respect of all good men in the community."²⁰

Despite the dominant number of blacks within the newly revamped Republican party, it failed to name any as a candidate. Instead, each party set forth an array of

white candidates that on paper appeared fairly indistinguishable. The Citizens ticket, comprised primarily of Democrats, consisted of a sailor, lawyer, shoemaker, bridge keeper, grocer, harness maker, and a carpenter, a representative cross section of white, middle-class Chestertown. Their assets ranged from the \$3,300 of the elderly keeper of the bridge across the Chester, John L. Ringgold, to \$28,000, for the lawyer James A. Pearce, who was born into a prominent family and eventually became a United States Senator. The Republican array was similar, including two carpenters, a grocer, a broker and a prosperous lumber merchant, William Vannort, one of Chestertown's wealthiest residents with \$100,000 in assets.²¹

When the day of parading to the voting window came, the significance of black suffrage was well understood. Although the totals varied slightly from candidate to candidate, the final tally indicated that about 130 black Republican voters joined with twenty-seven white Republicans (seven of whom were the candidates themselves) to elect a straight Republican ticket. Some 137 white conservatives found themselves out-pollled by an average margin of about twenty-two votes. The newly enfranchised black Republican voters accounted for nearly all of the party's tally. Overwhelmingly they delivered into office the seven white Republican candidates.²²

To the liberal Baltimore press, "a new era had dawned upon the people of Chestertown. The colored man has cast his ballot for the first time, and victory crowned the act." But locally the Chestertown *Transcript* observed that "the spectacle at the polls" had been "both novel and amusing." The blacks "seemed to be voting under duress of some secret organization and pledged order."²³

Both sides hurled back and forth charges of election law violations. The Republican press asserted that "every method was resorted to to intimidate the colored voter and drive him from the polls." The Democratic press replied that blacks voted without molestation and, if anything, many nonresident blacks were improperly permitted to vote. In light of the definite outcome and broad black involvement, coupled with Democratic fears that repression of the franchise would bring federal intervention, it appears that the Republican hyperbole was unwarranted. Nevertheless, all agreed that the day passed peacefully.²⁴

The most dramatic set of charges concerned allegations that an enterprising black property owner, Isaac Anderson, had taken advantage of a voting law loophole. The ballot for the town's election was available to any male who owned (or whose wife owned) real estate in the town. Though seemingly a neophyte in the electoral process, Anderson, who owned a small parcel of land on the Chester River, displayed definite political talent. A couple of weeks before the election he greatly enhanced Republican fortunes by deeding three feet, nine inches of his property to forty-four fellow African Americans in exchange for fifteen dollars. Although outrage ensued in the local press, the *Transcript* was forced to acknowledge that the same device had been used several years earlier by a group of white men. In the newspaper's view, "real estate holders were manufactured by wholesale" for the election by both parties. The Republican Cecil *Whig* gloated: "The Democracy of Kent will likely change their opinion of the colored man's political qualification if he shows such aptness already for political strategy."²⁵

Out of the debate concerning Anderson's escapades came another report, later retracted, that the three wealthiest black businessmen in town, Perkins, James Jones, and Perry Chambers, had entered the town election. The *Transcript* acknowledged that there had been talk of them running, but that white Republican leaders had discouraged it as being "too soon" for a step this dramatic.²⁶

After enduring a week within which to digest fully the significance of the Republican sweep in the town elections, the *Transcript's* editorial tone turned toward insult. The weekly proclaimed it an "unnatural proposition" that the black man should be permitted to intrude into governmental affairs. After all, in this modern "age of civilization," ours "should be a White Man's Government" and one could surely not "make white men out of niggers." The hidden benefit of the Fifteenth Amendment, the paper nevertheless suggested, was to rally Democrats and wavering Republicans to a new resolve. The "pride of race in the Caucasian element which even Mongrel influence cannot obliterate" would constrain whites to "resume control of their own government."²⁷ In large part this view, indeed, defined the next century of racial politics on the Eastern Shore.

NOTES

1. *Chestertown Transcript*, 22 January and 5 March 1870.
2. *Ibid.*, 5 March and 2 April 1870. The staunchly Democratic *Easton Star* in neighboring Talbot County remarked with resignation, "The evil so long dreaded by all true men is upon us, and there is no way of getting rid of it." 1 March 1870.
3. *Chestertown Transcript*, 5 March, 2 and 9 April 1870.
4. *Ibid.*, 5 March 1870. Neighboring weeklies initially came to the same conclusion. The *Centreville Observer* counseled that to ignore the black vote would be "suicidal" for the Democrats. The *Cecil Democrat*, despite its feeling that the new black voters were totally unfit for the task, urged that Democrats encourage their votes in hope that they "might assimilate to our ways." *Baltimore American*, 19 March 1870, quoting each paper.
5. United States Constitution, Amendment XV. Regarding Grant's proclamation, see *Baltimore Sun*, 31 March 1870; *Baltimore American*, 31 March 1870. Regarding Bowie's veto, see *Baltimore American*, 4 April 1870; *American Union* (Denton), 7 April 1870; *Cecil Whig*, 16 April 1870. In his inaugural address Bowie's list of aspirations of his administration was headed by "white supremacy the country over, not negro equality here in the North, and negro domination there in the South . . ." Carl N. Everstine, *The General Assembly of Maryland 1850-1920*, (Charlottesville: Michie Co., 1984), p. 279.
6. *Baltimore American*, 5 April 1870. The *Chestertown Transcript* gave this first-vote honor to Elijah Quigley. *Chestertown Transcript*, 9 April 1870.
7. *Cambridge Telegraph*, 14 May 1870.
8. *Baltimore Sun*, 11 April 1870; *Baltimore American*, 4 April 1870.
9. *Chestertown Transcript*, 9 April 1870. In neighboring Talbot County the Democratic weekly had already reached this conclusion. The *Easton Star* predicted

that "the species that is inferior to the white," would want to go to white schools, thereby driving out white pupils. "The only salvation" it saw for the "white schools, and white race, [was] for the people to maintain the supremacy of the Democratic party in the State, for only it has the numbers to control the negroes and prevent the dreaded calamity." *Easton Star*, 8 March 1870.

10. *Easton Star*, 19 April 1870; see also *Ninth Census of the United States, Statistics of Population* (Washington, D.C.: 1872), p. 164. The *Baltimore Sun* cast some doubt on this conclusion, reporting that "two tickets were found in the box with the names of negro men on them for town offices." Perhaps local officials had attempted to ignore the fact that two blacks had voted. Possibly, two white voters had cast ballots for black write-in candidates. Whatever the explanation, the white establishment of St. Michael's had postponed until a later day the need to share the ballot with its black citizens. *Baltimore Sun*, 6 April 1870.

11. *Ninth Census of the United States, Statistics of Population*, p. 164; *Easton Star*, 10 May 1870. Farther north in Elkton a different scenario played out. There, the registrar set a special two-day period in April permitting new registrations for the town's 1870 election. This added fifty black and sixteen white voters to the eligibility list. Due to being kept at a distance on these two days by work on farms or on the water, about twenty-five other black men were unable to register. On 2 May these fifty men cast their first ballots as American citizens. Although nearly all of the black votes were counted on the Republican side, Democratic candidates of the "White Man's Party" easily prevailed by a comfortable margin. *Cecil Whig*, 30 April and 7 May 1870; *Easton Star*, 16, 23 and 30 April 1870, 7 May 1870; *Chestertown Transcript*, 7 May 1870; *Baltimore Sun*, 5 May 1870.

12. Bayard Taylor, "Down the Eastern Shore," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 43 (1871):702, 704.

13. 1870 Manuscript Census (Chestertown). Wicomico Bicentennial Commission, *The 1877 Atlases and Other Early Maps of the Eastern Shore of Maryland* (Salisbury: Peninsula Press, 1976), pp. 122, 140.

14. *Baltimore Sun*, 25 April 1872 (Republican Convention), 15 April 1875 (grand jury).

15. 1870 Manuscript Census (Chestertown).

16. *Chestertown Transcript*, 16 April 1870. Richard Paul Fuke, "Hugh Lennox Bond and Radical Republican Ideology," *Journal of Southern History*, 45 (1979): 569-86. For an insight into Bond's campaign on the Shore, see *Baltimore American*, 1 July 1867.

17. This account of celebration is taken from news reports in the *Kent News*, 21 May 1870; *Chestertown Transcript*, 21 May 1870; *Baltimore American*, 23 May 1870. Richard Jones was a fifty-year-old carter, of far more modest means than James Jones. 1870 Manuscript Census (Chestertown).

18. Reyford Logan & Michael R. Winston, *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982), 252-53; Leroy Graham, *Baltimore, the Nineteenth Century Black Capitol*, (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), 168-69; George Bragg, *Men of Maryland* (Baltimore: Church Advocate Press, 1925), 54-57.

19. Chestertown Transcript, 2 and 26 February 1870 (Chesapeake ink); 1870 Manuscript Census; Frederick G. and William B. Usilton III, *History of Kent County, Maryland* (Chestertown: Perry Publications, 1980), pp. 144-45. William Usilton in 1980 claimed that Crawford's wealth and military status "turned out to be a myth, and he went broke and left town and [had] not since been heard from." *Ibid.*, p. 145.

20. *Baltimore American*, 23 May 1870.

21. *Ibid.*, 26 May 1870 (list of candidates); 1870 Manuscript Census (candidates' assets and employment). Five of the seven Republicans would form its unopposed, all-white slate a year later and ease into office with 186 votes, 165 of which were from black voters. *Kent News*, 27 May 1871.

22. The Chestertown election is reported in *Kent News*, 28 May 1870; *Chestertown Transcript*, 28 May 1870; *Baltimore American*, 26 May 1870. Only one black man, thirty-five-year-old Richard Reed, one of the town's barbers, voted for the "White Man's Party." *Chestertown Transcript*, 28 May 1870. The population of Chestertown in 1870 was 43.2 percent black. *Ninth Census of the United States, Statistics of Population*, p. 164. Blacks cast 44 percent of all votes in the town's 1870 election.

23. *Baltimore American*, 26 May 1870; *Chestertown Transcript*, 28 May 1870.

24. *Ibid.*; *Chestertown Transcript*, 28 May 1870.

25. *Chestertown Transcript*, 28 May and 11 June 1870; *Cambridge Telegraph*, 14 May 1870; *Cecil Whig*, 14 May and 4 June 1870. Crawford's paper, the *Freeman's Journal*, first broke the story that one square foot of land was sold to ninety-four Democrats. See *American Union* (Denton), 20 October 1870. The property ownership provision had been enacted by the legislature in 1868. Race played no part in it and many protested its imposition at a rally at the Town Hall. *Kent News*, 25 April and 23 May 1868.

26. *Cecil Whig*, 4 and 11 June 1870; *Chestertown Transcript*, 11 June 1870.

27. *Chestertown Transcript*, 4 June 1870.