

# The Bi-Racial Moment in Post-Bellum Virginia: The Readjuster Party

*by Richard F. Welch*

Largely overlooked, or at least undervalued, in the current debates over America's racial history is the story of individuals and movements who challenged entrenched injustice, oppression, and discrimination prior to the twentieth century's civil rights movement. Specifically, the politicized and racially charged academic milieu has made it risky for historians to focus their energies on instances in which white people sought to form coalitions with blacks to work for change. Little wonder, then, that Nikole Hannah-Jones, primary author of the *New York Times's* 1619 Project, declared erroneously in the Project's lead article, "For the most part, black Americans fought [to secure rights] alone."<sup>1</sup>

Even if these efforts failed to achieve long-term goals, their study is crucial for an accurate understanding of America's past and the development of its national character. One prominent movement overlooked by historians and race activists is the Readjuster Party that arose

in Virginia in the late 1870s and early 1880s. During a period of reaction against the Constitutional and legal protections for recently emancipated African Americans, the Readjusters sought to forge a bi-racial political movement with the goal of implementing statewide economic and political reforms. Unusual in its membership and program, it was even more striking for its leader—former Confederate general William Mahone.

The Readjuster movement emerged from disputes over Virginia's state debt, an argument rooted in class antagonisms but that affected racial politics as well. Arguments over the state debt, submerged during "radical reconstruction," burst onto the public stage after 1870 when Virginia regained full statehood status. Those who owned antebellum bonds insisted that Virginia honor the bonds at the denominations and rates in effect in 1861. The Funders, as they were called, tended to be from the pre-war elite. Their opponents, the Readjusters,

argued that post-war conditions, particularly the widespread destruction of farms and infrastructure suffered during the struggle, dictated that the state's debt be revised downwards. Readjusters also pressed for increased funding for public schools, state institutions, and public works.

In contrast, the Conservatives or "Bourbons" sharply cut support for public schools to stave off default and bankruptcy. Indeed, in 1878, the Conservative gubernatorial candidate declared it would be "better for the state to burn the schools" than repudiate the state debt.<sup>2</sup> For many if not most Virginians, black and white, who couldn't afford private education, this was a slap in the face at their hopes of advancement for themselves and their children. The Readjusters organized around an unexpected leader: former Confederate general, and railroad entrepreneur—William Mahone.

Mahone, descended from Irish immigrants, was born December 21, 1826. His family was respectable, though a long way from the planter elite that dominated the Virginia government. Demonstrating an early appetite for engineering, young Mahone was attracted to "internal improvements"—public works—the vogue for which was sweeping the nation, though more in the north than the south. He was particularly drawn to the revolutionary marvel of railroads whose potential for reordering transportation, and much else, fired his imagination.

After completing his education at Virginia Military Institute, Mahone be-

gan his career as a surveyor with the Orange and Alexandria Railroad in 1849. By 1860 he had risen to the presidency of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad and became a leading promoter of railroad expansion as the engine of Virginia's prosperity. The onset of the Civil War put his ambitions and projects on hold, though he would return to them after 1865. Mahone's antebellum politics are unclear, but he followed his native state in its withdrawal from the union and commenced a career as a Confederate officer. Mahone served through Appomattox, and returned to Norfolk to resume his railroad career.

Mahone began rebuilding Virginia's largely destroyed railroad system. Starting as president of the Southside Railroad, he began consolidating railroad lines in southern Virginia. When the depression of 1873 forced railroad reorganization, Mahone entered politics not only to protect his railroad interests, but also to further his long-held belief that Virginia's future demanded modernization—both economic and social. He was very much a "New South" man, one of many southern leaders who sought to promote growth and prosperity through industrialization, economic diversity, and education. As far as Mahone was concerned there could be no "New South" without African Americans.

During the period of radical Republican control, when Virginia was under military occupation, Mahone supported the Conservative Party's effort to restore civilian government. By the mid-1870s, however, he became disenchanted

with the Bourbons, whom he viewed as blocking the cause of modernization in Virginia, and threw in his lot with the Readjusters. He soon became the face and energy of the movement.

By 1877, Mahone was forcefully pushing the Refunders two key interconnected objectives: reducing the debt and supporting public education. Though he himself was blocked from gaining the governor's seat in 1877, twenty-two Readjuster "independents" were elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, and the movement showed no signs of slowing down.

Mahone early recognized that the Readjusters needed African American votes to ensure success. Following emancipation in 1865, black Virginians enthusiastically embraced their newly guaranteed political rights including voting. Indeed, despite increasing impediments after 1886, most black men exercised their right to the franchise until 1900.<sup>3</sup> Mahone and his lieutenants reached out to black leaders, then largely Republican, assuring them that their concerns would be addressed, and they would share in any patronage within his gift.<sup>4</sup> Mahone's outreach was partly personal; he believed blacks were entitled to both their civil rights and a voice in government. He also understood that with the white vote split between Conservatives and Readjusters, the black vote was crucial to the new party.

In February 1879, the Readjusters held their "People's Convention" at Mozart Hall in Richmond, effectively announcing the birth of a new political

party in Virginia. Most of the delegates had been liberal Conservatives, but there were many Republicans, and some Greenbackers, another protest party supported by debtors. The convention was conspicuously bi-racial with black delegates attending "in response to the call which convened the people of Virginia without distinction of color."<sup>5</sup>

The ensuing campaign season was heated and sometimes raucous. Throughout the spring primaries, the Readjusters created strong local organizations, the effectiveness of which stunned the Conservatives. Public meetings and debates were marked by name-calling and resorts to class antagonisms. Heckling and fist fights broke out, and reports circulated that dueling, thought to be extinct, was making a comeback among the more hot-headed members of each side.<sup>6</sup>

Already strong in the southern and southwestern parts of the state populated largely by less affluent whites with a traditional sense of grievance toward the Tidewater elites, the Readjusters pursued the black vote. Rebuffing Bourbon criticism of the black presence in their ranks, the Readjusters declared they preferred the "honest Negro" to "Bourbon Republicans."<sup>7</sup>

The election was a blow-out for the Readjusters, a feat they repeated two years later. The new movement took both chambers of the Virginia legislature and the governor's chair. As expected, the Readjusters performed strongest among whites and former Conservatives in the southwest and Shenandoah Val-

ley, while scoring heavily among blacks and Republicans in the Tidewater and Southside.<sup>8</sup> In any event, the election signaled the beginning of a Readjuster ascendancy which lasted until 1885, and with it the dominance of William Mahone who was elected to the United States Senate in 1881.

The elections of 1879 and 1881 produced a major realignment of Virginia's politics. Mahone cut his already frayed ties with the Conservatives while they, in turn, amalgamated with the national Democratic Party. Mahone moved in the opposite direction, aligning himself with Republicans in both Washington and Virginia, and ultimately creating the "Republican Party of Virginia." To many, it seemed as if the Readjuster victory heralded the triumph of the "New South" portending a bright future for the Old Dominion.

Readjuster prospects grew brighter following Mahone's decision to caucus with Republicans in the Senate which gave the GOP control in that body. In return Mahone received 2,000 patronage jobs with which to reward his followers and build his organization.<sup>9</sup> By 1882, the new party was at its zenith controlling Virginia's executive, legislature, and courts as well as both U.S. Senate seats.

The Readjusters wasted no time in implementing their agenda. West Virginia was declared liable for one-third of the state's pre 1863 debt, and new bonds were issued at rates in line with Virginia's ability to pay. Collections from delinquent taxes and charges against railroads netted a surplus that was used to

implement the other main plank in the Readjuster program: support and expansion of public schools and other educational institutions. In general, the Readjuster program was most beneficial to small farmers, blacks included.<sup>10</sup>

The effects of the Readjuster education policy were immediately apparent. Between 1879, the last year of Funder rule, and 1880, the first of Readjuster administration, the number of schools, teachers, and expenditures doubled.<sup>11</sup> This included both white and black schools which were counted separately as the institutions were segregated. Additionally, the Normal and Collegiate Institute, now Virginia State University, was established for blacks in Petersburg. Provisions for modernized mental institutions were also implemented, with a facility set aside for black patients, again in the black majority city of Petersburg. Items of particular concern to black Virginians, including the abolition of the poll tax and ban on public whipping posts, a legacy of slavery, were enacted. Effective measures were also taken to suppress the resurgence of dueling. The state's Confederate past was respected through the continuation of appropriations for disabled southern soldiers. The party's commitment to education as an avenue of modernization continued with funding for the State Agricultural and Mechanical College and the Virginia Military Institute. Lastly, the Readjusters turned to voting which had sometimes been tainted by irregularities and pursued measures to ensure a "free ballot, a full vote, and a fair count."<sup>12</sup>

Overseeing this remarkable list of accomplishments stood the incongruous figure of William Mahone. Though his dandified taste in dress might suggest theater, his organizational abilities were authentic. As Chairman of the (Readjuster) State Executive Committee and Virginia's senior senator he was the source of power, patronage, and strategy. Under his leadership, the Readjusters created a political machine beyond anything then existing in the South. Indeed, its closest analogs were the Democratic organizations forming in northern cities.

Controlling federal patronage in Virginia, Mahone posted his followers and allies in any and all places within his purview—postmasters, inspectors at federal installations, including the Navy yards, and various bureaucratic positions. While the Readjusters reserved certain leadership posts for their white leaders, e.g., Congressional seats and high-profile state offices, blacks took seats on school boards, juries, city councils, and sometimes local police. Blacks demanded, and got, authority to place black teachers in African American schools. Mahone consulted with black leaders to ensure blacks received an adequate share of federal patronage as a reward for their support. At the height of Readjuster power African Americans comprised 27 percent of the Virginians employed at the Treasury, 11 percent at the Pension's Bureau, 54 percent in the secretary's office, and 38 percent at the Post Office.<sup>13</sup>

The Democrat/Conservatives raged impotently at their sudden reversal of

fortune that they laid, with some accuracy, at the former Confederate general's feet. He was denounced as a traitor for allying with Republicans in the Senate, and his party was derided as “a drove of hogs [driven by] a hog driver.”

Mahone was unmoved. He understood the crucial role blacks played in his coalition, though he did not view it in the negative light of his adversaries. As for his deepening alliance with Republicans, Mahone countered that failure to do so would “surrender Virginia, himself and all her people to Bourbons,” reactionary, retrograde, inimical to progress and beneficial primarily to the already established and wealthy.<sup>14</sup>

What infuriated the Democrats most was Mahone's promotion of African Americans to positions of authority. While some of this was political calculation, Mahone also recognized the value, and necessity of tapping the energies and talents of approximately one-third of Virginia's population that was black. As early as 1877 he advocated public education for all Virginians regardless of race. “The best interests of the state,” he declared, “demand that the large class of persons recently admitted to the privilege of citizenship should receive careful and complete instruction.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1889, as his political career was ending, Mahone expanded on his assessment of the importance of the black population to Virginia.

The colored man is here to stay, and he is an essential factor in our labor system. His place cannot be supplied. He is in great measure the life-giving power to allow industrial pursuits.

His labor contributes to the wealth of the state and the more we enlarge his capabilities and stimulate his efforts the greater will be his contributions. . .

The colored man is by instinct a Republican, and naturally a [economic] protectionist, as, in my judgement, every man who is dependent upon the sweat of his own brow ought to be."<sup>16</sup>

The inclusion of protectionism reveals another element in Mahone's and Republican-Readjuster policy. It had long been a Republican principle, inherited from their Whig progenitors, that the United States needed a wall of protective tariffs to shield American industry from cheaply made goods produced in Europe, particularly Britain. Such a policy, in their view, benefitted both business and labor by shielding them from foreign competition and cheaper labor.

Mahone's thinking regarding black participation in Virginia's economy led him to reconsider the effects of slavery on Virginia. Despite his Confederate past, he concluded slavery had been inimical to Virginia's economic and societal advancement. Linking it to protectionism's archenemy, free trade, he argued

Slavery, no matter where or in what form it existed, has been and is the consort of free trade because it lived and yet languished by slave labor. It was there that the class [of whites] which owned no slaves and was dependent upon the sweat of their brow for sustenance was kept back and down in the race of life by the enforced competition with slave labor."<sup>17</sup>

Mahone was a nineteenth century man in a particular place in time. His

concept of a bi-racial coalition as the engine of progress in Virginia did not extend to social equality. Blacks could vote, secure an education, participate in the workforce, and, locally, hold office. But there were limits. The Readjuster/Republicans gave few statewide offices to black followers. He also accepted segregation as a given with the races having their own separate institutions, schools, universities, hospitals, churches. Whatever its limitations, his overall support for black participation and achievement was turned against him by those opposed to the strong African American participation in his movement.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the Conservatives showered Mahone with praise. Once they recovered from the shock of the Readjuster victories, they commenced building a statewide political organization to rival his. Merging with the national Democrats and adopting their name, the "Bourbons" declared Virginia's recalibration of the state's debt and bond program a done deal, thus removing the unpopular Funder albatross from their necks. They then unleashed strident appeals to the "color line" to split the Readjuster coalition on racial lines. The state election of 1883 saw the first collision between the rejuvenated Democrats and Mahone's followers.

The growing friction between Readjuster biracial government and Democratic insistence on white domination exploded in Danville Virginia three days before the state elections in 1883. On November 3, a sidewalk shoving match

between white and black men escalated into a confrontation between a crowd of African Americans and a smaller number of armed whites, leaving five blacks dead. Armed white Democrats quickly seized control of Danville, while Democratic newspapers and speakers placed the blame for the shooting on “the Mahone Ring.”<sup>18</sup> “Mahone’s orators,” a Democratic Congressman later declared, “had inflamed the minds of the colored people to a dangerous pitch.”<sup>19</sup>

As Democrats stoked panic over “Africanization,” the Readjusters proved unable to organize an effective counter narrative in the few days before the vote. In a close election Democrats took control of state government and expelled or harried Republicans from state and local offices as thoroughly as Mahone had scrubbed them away three years before. Moreover, town charters were rewritten, and congressional districts redrawn to favor Democrats. The entire state electoral system effectively fell under their control.

In 1884, Democrat Grover Cleveland won the presidency and Mahone shortly lost the Federal patronage that had been a source of much of his power and influence. In the next gubernatorial election, the Democrats put up a candidate whose Civil War record was the equal to Mahone’s, and whose name was revered by almost all white Virginians—Robert E. Lee’s nephew and former cavalry commander, Fitzhugh Lee. Lee took the governor’s chair and the following year Mahone was ousted in his bid for reelection to the Senate. A conservative Democrat

spoke for most in his party when he exulted that “Virginia is rescued from the Domination of the Traitor and Scoundrel Mahone, and the Negroes.”<sup>20</sup>

The Democrats electoral victories effectively ended the Readjuster’s moment—and promise. To forestall a Readjuster/Republican comeback, Democrats doubled down on blatant appeals to racial solidarity and racial division. The very element that had given the Readjusters their strength and potential, the uniting of black and non-elite white voters, was turned against it. The bi-racial party was charged with “hybridizing Virginia,” a Democratic operative declaring that “if the [Readjuster] coalition had a face it was mulatto.”<sup>21</sup>

The Democratic assault was relentless. Elections were couched in terms of a choice between white or black government with no possibility of anything in between. Readjusters, they claimed, favored miscegenation—which they did not. They had made no moves to repeal Virginia’s statutes banning interracial marriage. The Readjuster policy of uniting whites and blacks along lines of interest, recognizing the civil rights of blacks as valid, were denounced as assaults on white privilege.<sup>22</sup> The Democratic grip on Virginia tightened inexorably. A revised election law in 1884 awarded them two of three election judges in every voting precinct in Virginia. Voter fraud, suppression, and intimidation quickly ensued.<sup>23</sup> It would get worse.

The aging general made one more attempt at political office, running for gov-

ernor in 1889. But by this time the debt crisis, education, and social reforms they helped achieve made their issues less salient. The Readjusters rose to power when the state was threatened with financial collapse and in need of social and economic reforms that were blocked by the Bourbons. After the Readjusters straightened out the bond-debt crisis and blazed new paths in education and social reforms, many of their white followers were at least relatively content, and their support for the new party fell off.

The bi-racial nature of the Readjusters always made it vulnerable to attacks from conservative or reactionary elements in the white population. Slavery was barely gone thirty years, and many older whites could not adjust to any semblance of black equality, no matter how limited.

But even as they consolidated their strangle hold on Virginia's government in the late 1880s and 1890s, Democrats remained troubled by the unbidden specter of the bantam-sized, flowing beard ex-Confederate general leading a bi-racial, class-based populist political movement to the electoral barricades. They took steps to render such an unwelcome event impossible. In 1894 Virginia adopted the secret ballot. On the surface a positive stride towards free elections, the law's written signature requirement disenfranchised many illiterate blacks and a not inconsiderable number of similarly disadvantaged poorer whites.

In 1902, Democrats sealed their goal of one-party rule through the creation of

a new state Constitution. Only eighteen percent of eligible voters bothered to cast their ballots in the referendum authorizing the constitutional convention whose avowed purpose was suffrage restriction—effectively black disenfranchisement.<sup>24</sup>

The new voting criteria restricted suffrage to Union or Confederate veterans or their descendants, those who could demonstrate an ability to read and explain a section of the new Constitution, and payment of a poll tax.<sup>25</sup> The revised blueprint of government was not submitted to citizens for approval, it was simply declared in effect. As a result, black voting crashed and the white electorate was nearly halved.<sup>26</sup> With effective opposition crushed, Virginia's Democratic majority proceeded to impose the Jim Crow system in virtually every area of the state's social, economic, and political life.

Was another outcome possible? Could the Readjusters have held on and flourished? Perhaps a leader less autocratic than Mahone, one who lacked his habit of alienating friends and allies, would have helped. On the other hand, without him the movement would never have coalesced into the force it became, however short-lived. Lastly, if the presidential election of 1884 had had a different outcome, and Mahone and his followers held on to federal patronage, perhaps they could have survived as a viable opposition. Not likely, but unknowable.

There were other attempts at forming bi-racial political parties or organi-



zations in the South before 1900, but none of them enjoyed the success of the Readjusters, and none threatened white only segregationist parties as they had. Despite their ultimate failure they pointed to a new, and more equitable path towards government, one that maintained the intent of the Civil Rights amendments while also challenging entrenched moneyed interests. They were remembered in Virginia, and elsewhere, as either a vision deferred, or a nightmare to be avoided.

As for Mahone, he returned to private life. He had been relatively wealthy in his railroad years and had invested heavily in lead mines in western Virginia as well as in Washington, DC real estate. These had proven to be far less lucrative than he assumed.

William Mahone died in Washington October 8, 1895. His body was returned to Petersburg and buried in the Blandford Cemetery, where so many of his former comrades also slept. But his ghost refused to lie still.

---

**Richard F. Welch** is an historian of American history, Western civilization, and Irish history. He taught at the C.W. Post campus of Long Island University and at Farmingdale State College. The author of several books and articles, Welch also worked as an historical consultant, museum exhibit curator, and editor of *Long Island Forum*, a regional history magazine.

---

1. Nikole Hannah-Jones, "Our democracy's founding ideals were false . . .," 1619 Project, *New York Times*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>.
2. Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow. The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 30.

3. Nelson Morehouse Blake, William Mahone of Virginia. Soldier and Political Insurgent. (Richmond: Garrett & Massey, 1935), 88.
4. *Ibid.*, 47.
5. Blake, 176.
6. C.C. Pearson, "The Readjuster Movement in Virginia," *The American Historical Review*, 21, no. 4, (July 1916), 743.
7. *Ibid.*, 744.
8. Blake, 182.
9. Dailey, 57.
10. Pearson, 189.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 192.
13. Daily, 77.
14. Blake, 212.
15. *Ibid.*, 149.
16. *Ibid.*, 247.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Dailey, 119.
19. *Ibid.*, 124.
20. Blake, 261.
21. Dailey, 141.
22. *Ibid.*, 148.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 164.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, 14.