



Reclaiming History

THE ORIGINS OF THE “OLD” RICHMOND CITY HALL

A Black and White Worker Alliance Before the “Lost Cause”

This essay has been updated from one written more than a decade ago, drawing from research undertaken by Dr. Rachleff for his Ph.D. dissertation completed in 1981 and included in his book, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890* (University of Illinois Press, 1989). This account begins to explain how an alliance of African American and white trade unionists launched a campaign to build a new city hall that, at a moment where the promise of Reconstruction had not yet been cut short by the politics of retrenchment. Indeed, this was a period in Richmond and Virginia history which has been forgotten, even erased, from local narratives and memory.

THE OLD RICHMOND CITY HALL HAS AN IMPORTANT STORY TO TELL

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Our society, South and North, East, Midwest, and West, urban and rural, is engaged in an intense conversation about our history -- which individuals are deserving of monuments, whose stories should be included in school curricula, and how we should grapple with the complex experiences which have shaped our national identity. Richmond, Virginia is typically remembered as the former capital of the Confederacy or its opposition to school integration almost a century later. But there is another story to be told, an untold story hidden in plain sight, which is embodied in the handsome Old City Hall. It is time to tell this story.

In the mid-1880s, Richmond working men and women organized themselves into what was then the country's most prominent labor organization, "The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor." The Knights embraced the motto, "An Injury to One is the Concern of All," and they were the first American labor organization to include women as well as men, African Americans as well as whites, immigrants as well as the native-born, unskilled workers along with skilled workers. More than 40 years ago, while conducting my Ph.D. dissertation research, I discovered that, in Richmond in 1886, members of the Knights organized a bi-racial Workingmen's Reform Party and, in May of that year, swept to control of the city government. How did this come to be?

The central issue around which the Workingmen's Reform Party organized was the construction of a new city hall. In 1885, local business leaders and the sitting city government put forward a proposal for such a project, which would be put out to bid and awarded to the lowest bidder. The Knights of Labor responded with a different vision, reflective of the values they honored. They petitioned that the city hall be built out of local materials (a substantial granite bed just outside the city had already provided the materials for the federal State Department building recently completed in Washington, D.C.), that it be built by local workers employed directly by the city (not by contractors), working an eight-hour day at union wages, and that all jobs on the project, including the most skilled, be open to the employment of "colored" workers.

Their campaign rested on years of organizing and activism, tackling issues which concerned the breadth of their membership. One of these issues was convict labor. The Virginia State Penitentiary loomed over

the center of Richmond, and, through its practice of convict leasing, cast a shadow over the abilities of free workers to earn a decent living. Among those most damaged were the city's barrel makers. These coopers, as they were known at the time, were the city's most racially mixed skilled trade. Plantation slaves had been trained in barrel-making, as barrels were vital to the shipment of tobacco to regional and urban markets. After Emancipation, some of those coopers migrated into Richmond where they not only plied their trade but also taught younger African American men to practice it. Their work was essential for shipping of tobacco, flour and iron nails, cornerstones of the local economy. When the Virginia State Penitentiary allowed a local entrepreneur to place a state-of-the-art barrel shop inside it, employing 110 convicts at 25 cents a day each, local coopers, black and white, who had been earning \$2.50 a day, were thrown into crisis. In mid-1885, the Knights launched a campaign to close that convict barrel factory and thereby fight for the needs of African American and white workers together.

Their strategy would prove critical not only to their success but also to the transformation of their labor organization into a political and social movement. The Knights pressured the penitentiary through a community boycott of the flour milled, packaged, and sold locally by the Haxall-Crenshaw Company, the largest purchaser of convict-made barrels and the largest company in the city's flour industry. The Knights' assemblies, black and white, organized their members and their families to refuse to purchase Haxall-Crenshaw flour. Since the flour buyer for a family might well be a non-wage-earning woman or an older child, the Knights set about educating members to, in turn, educate their families about the importance of adhering to this boycott. They also increased their pressure by calling for a boycott of any store which sold Haxall-Crenshaw flour. The *Richmond Labor Herald*, a weekly newspaper edited by William Mullen, the District Master Workman of DA 84, posted on the front page of each issue two lists – the stores which sold Haxall-Crenshaw flour and were, therefore, not to be patronized, and the stores which did not.

In the October 17, 1885, issue, Mullen placed this campaign in a set of contexts which reflected the organization's values. Mullen likened their movement to God's "boycott" of the Egyptians via the ten plagues, on the one hand, and the Boston tea partyers' attack on British tea, on the other. This religious and political language resonated with both white and African American members of the K of L. Through the fall of 1885, whole families and community organizations, from church congregations to mutual benefit societies, became part of the labor movement.

This campaign also distanced the movement from both political parties, as the Democrats and the Republicans alike refused to support calls for state legislation to restrict convict labor. In October, veteran Black activists from Richmond convened a statewide Black political convention, which resolved: "We, the colored people of Virginia, believing as we do that the time has come for us to call a halt in the unqualified support that we have given to the Republican party here." The boycott campaign was laying a critical foundation for the political campaign the Knights would wage in the spring of 1886.

The foundation of the K of L's boycott campaign stood on the shoulders of an earlier political movement, the "Readjusters." In 1873, the national economy had fallen into a deep economic depression. In Virginia, by 1875, the state government faced a fiscal crisis. The conservative elite leadership placed a priority on the repayment of bonds held by British banks, reflecting investments in Virginia infrastructure which had been made in the 1850s. To make these bond payments, the state government slashed funding for education, which forced communities to close schools across the state. Small farmers, white workers, and African Americans came together under the leadership of a charismatic former Confederate general, William Mahone to call for the "readjustment" of the state debt by offering the British twenty-five cents on the dollar. When bankers, business leaders, and elite politicians argued that debt repayment was a

matter of “honor,” African American activists responded that the debt had been amassed in the waning days of slavery in an effort to reinvigorate the “peculiar institution,” and that they felt no obligation to repay it. Although the Readjusters never achieved their statewide goals, in Richmond they created a political space within which African Americans expressed themselves independently of the Republicans establishment and within which African Americans and discontented white workers explored and discovered their common interests and perspectives. Their class identities were outweighing their racial identities. Ideas and relationships forged in the late 1870s and early 1880s provided a foundation for the 1885 boycott campaign, which in turn provided a foundation for the 1886 election campaign.

Even though they lacked the right to vote, women, both white and black, played critical roles in these campaigns. Within each District Assembly there were women’s local assemblies. Women participated, both as workers and as consumers, in the cooperatives – an underwear factory, a soap factory, a building cooperative – the Knights created. In the Haxall-Crenshaw boycott, they organized in churches and mutual aid societies, took a visible part in political rallies, and on election day itself, they marched shifts around polling places, urging men to vote for the Workingmen’s Reform ticket. The Knights’ activism made room for African American and white women’s participation and it reflected their energies and influence.

In late May 1886 the Workingmen’s Reform ticket swept to a majority of the city council. In Jackson Ward, the predominantly African American district created by gerrymandering after “redemption,” Black candidates affiliated with the movement were elected, and, in working class districts, which had significant African American as well as white residents, white Reform candidates carried the day. In the fall of 1886, ground was broken for the construction of the new city hall, and it would be completed in 1894. Additional historical research is needed to determine whether, in the end, the project adhered to the Knights of Labor’s pledge to rely on local workers, directly employed by the city on an eight-hour day at union-scale wages, and whether African Americans would hold some of the skilled jobs.

Now known as “the old City Hall,” this is an especially beautiful building of architectural, symbolic, and historical significance. It is time for its story to be told and to inform our understanding of Richmond’s history. The racial justice uprising in the wake of the murder of George Floyd (here in the Twin Cities, where I live) has led to heated debates about the impact of racism in our past, present, and future. Monuments have been taken down, curricula is being debated, and books have been pulled from classrooms and libraries. In the midst of this racial reckoning, it is more important than ever that the story of Richmond’s Old City Hall be told.

Peter Rachleff

Emeritus Professor of History, Macalester College

Co-founder, East Side Freedom Library, Saint Paul, Minnesota

Author, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890*, 1865-1890 (University of Illinois Press, 1989)

This 2020 article by Dr. Rachleff, published in the Progressive Magazine, links the construction of the Lee Monument to the campaign to further undermine the standing of the Workingmen’s Reform coalition.

<https://progressive.org/latest/story-behind-lee-statue-richmond-virginia-rachleff-200707/>