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Reconstruction Politics in Washington: "An Experimental Garden for Radical Plants"

THOMAS R. JOHNSON

This extraordinary immigration is in no sense due to the war, because all the sources of supply at the South were cut off.... It is directly and chiefly attributable to partisan causes, and can be traced with certainty to the recent date, when Congress, treating this District as an experimental garden for Radical plants, conferred the privilege of suffrage upon the blacks...

*The Daily Patriot* (Washington), September 26, 1872

Southern Reconstruction marked the most elaborate, extensive and unsuccessful effort at Federal promotion and protection of a minority group in American history. Enthusiastic Radicals spread their doctrines of equality throughout the land, tinkered with local governments, and promoted new social customs. That this was ultimately barren is made plain by the stark facts of Reconstruction. All the Radical regimes succumbed to conservative reaction and the long-term result was a period of flinhard white prejudice. To discover the reasons for this failure, Reconstruction has been dissected and studied in every Southern state. Yet Washington, the place most completely controlled by the Radicals, and most affected by the massive dislocation of Negroes during and after the war, has been neglected. To study Radical tactics in Washington is to see a mirror image of Reconstruction nearly two years in advance of similar images in Southern states. To see its failure there is to predict similar failure elsewhere. The lament of *The Daily Patriot* in 1872 put a window on the soul of white Washington and displayed for the world the uncompromising bitterness of the city first subjected to the Reconstruction master plan.

Washington provided the Radicals with an ideal testing ground. The city had been the subject of similar experiments before the war. Federal territories might also be used, but the citizens usually proved intractable, defiant and physically remote. To the contrary, Congress-
men resided part of the year in Washington, read the local newspapers, walked the streets and met the citizens. Congress had altered the form of government of the Federal District and even its boundaries. There seemed to be little question that Congress could alter the social customs and political rules.

Congressional Radicals seemed to agree that Negro suffrage was the first step. This was first proposed in Washington in December, 1865, during the early days of the first Congressional session after Lincoln's death. It was like a telegraphed punch and Congressional conservatives quickly "exposed" it for what it was. "This contest is but an experiment, a skirmish, an entering wedge," said Garrett Davis of Kentucky, "to prepare the way for a similar movement in Congress to confer the right of suffrage on all the negroes of the United States. It is following up the tactics of the party four years ago, when the assault upon slavery in this District heralded the general movement that was to be made against it."\(^1\) The measure became lost in the crush of business during the first session of the thirty-ninth Congress, but Charles Sumner revived it the following December. President Andrew Johnson's heavy defeat in the 1866 Congressional elections placed Radicals in an enormously strengthened bargaining position and they promptly passed it over conservative objections. Moreover, they added a loyalty provision which denied suffrage to those who had "been convicted of any infamous crime or persons who may have given aid and comfort to the rebels in the late rebellion."\(^2\) President Johnson, pointedly alluding to the Radicals when he said that voting blacks "could readily be made subservient to the purposes of designing persons," vetoed the measure, but the Senate and House easily turned aside his veto (29-10 and 113-38 respectively).\(^3\)

Washington had always been a Southern town. Surrounded by slave states, its citizenry was almost entirely Southern in origin.\(^4\) During the war Congress had regarded white Washingtonians as Southern sympathizers to a man and residents were forced to sign a special loyalty oath. Yet discerning Radicals were well aware of potential Radical strength. Washington was experiencing a massive Negro migration, was in fact the first Northern city ever to absorb significant numbers of Negroes. Congressmen observed with their eyes

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\(^1\) Congressional Globe, 39th Cong., 1st sess., January 16, 1866, p. 246.
\(^2\) Ibid., 39th Cong., 2nd sess., Appendix, p. 80. Similar restrictions on white voting appeared in the later Reconstructions acts.
\(^3\) Ibid., January 7, 1867, pp. 304, 313; January 8, p. 344.
\(^4\) In 1860, for instance, 76 per cent of those Washingtonians from outside the city had been born in slave states. See Secretary of the Interior, Census Office, Eighth Census, Vol I: Population of the United States in 1860, p. 389.
the hordes of Southern blacks streaming into the city, swelling its black population from 14,316 in 1860 to 35,455 a decade later. By anyone's mathematics this meant trouble for Washington's conservatives.

Though the newcomers were leaderless among themselves, the "old resident" black community provided a collection of remarkably able leaders. Most prominent was John F. Cook, son of a black Presbyterian minister and schoolmaster, who in 1867 led demands for Negro suffrage. In time he was joined by even more able leaders from other cities. Washington became a magnet for the national black leaders. Both John Mercer Langston and the Frederick Douglass family were lured to Washington by Federal patronage in the late 1860's. While patronage provided strong enticement, many prominent black professionals were attracted by Howard University. The talent and prestige of the Washington black community came to dwarf those in all other cities. Washington Negroes formed the spearhead of the black civil rights movement during Reconstruction.

Washington's white Radicals were only local in stature but were determined and resourceful. Most were transplanted New Englanders, as the abolitionist persuasion did not come naturally to the District. The most extreme and successful were Frederick Boswell and Sayles J. Bowen. Boswell was a New Englander who rose from obscurity in the working class Seventh Ward to election as the city register in 1867. He gained such popularity among blacks that his nomination for office was viewed as tantamount to nominating a Negro. But the great champion of the Radical-Negro alliance, the formulator of the voting bloc and the architect of Radical politics in Washington, was Sayles J. Bowen. He, too, was a displaced New Englander, who had come to Washington seeking government work in 1848. His passion for abolitionism caused his removal from his government job but he stayed on to bedevil conservatives. Tall, humorless and irascible, Bowen had a talent for making enemies among the "better sort." But he was apparently well connected, and his enemies alleged that he had the ear of Lincoln on local matters. Bowen's success at getting patronage appointments during the war provides indirect substantiation. Local newspapers called him "Six Teat Bowen" after the six appointive offices which he contrived, all at one time, to grasp. Bowen became identified with the effort to educate blacks in Washington. He was instrumental in the creation of a Negro school system and (it has been

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6 In 1865 he infuriated white Washingtonians by accusing them of wartime disloyalty. See Washington Evening Star, December 19, 1865, p. 1. (Hereinafter cited as Star.)
alleged) contributed $20,000 of his personal funds to support the
system in the early days when the local city council refused to fund
Negro schools.7

When the Negro suffrage bill was passed over Johnson’s veto in
February, 1867, local Radicals went immediately to work drumming
up support for the June elections. They drew from seemingly bottom-
less wellsprings of national talent, enticing O. O. Howard, Henry
Wilson, Benjamin Butler, George Julian and George Boutwell to make
campaign appearances. Many of the rallies were held in Negro churches
and the speech-making left little doubt concerning the race of the
hearers. The Chronicle, Radical spokesman for the capital, admitted
that “Our strength among the whites, though probably greater than
at any previous time, will scarcely compare with the number of our
friends among the blacks....”8

Local Radicals successfully mobilized the Negro bloc in 1867,
winning all three executive offices elected in that year and sixteen of
the twenty-eight legislative positions. They won through the simple
mathematics of voter turnout. Local elections had been only lightly
attended in the past, most of the “better citizens” rarely bothering to
vote. The pattern held in 1867, so that when registration concluded in
May, Negroes comprised half the electorate, though they amounted
only to one-third of the population. The ward election results showed
an almost perfect correlation between Negro registration and Repub-
lican voting majorities.9 Conservatives sensed the end of an era.
Swamped by racial and political change, they could, like George
Pullman, fall back only on the paleolitic paternalism which had been
their instinctive method of dealing with those they considered inferior.
Lamented one conservative city councilman, defeated at the polls and
relegated to political obscurity by former slaves:

Men who have been reared in this community, who have had the encour-
agement and kindly sympathies of our people, and who have had open to
them the same avenues as other laboring men to that competence which is
generally the reward of industry and frugality, have, with but few respect-
able exceptions, proved themselves callous to those higher virtues which
most exalt and ennoble manhood, and seized the first opportunity offered
to array themselves in open hostility to a community comprising thousands

7 Though no full-length biography of Bowen exists, his checkered career can be pieced
together from the following sources: William Tindall, “A Sketch of Mayor Sayles J. Bowen,”
Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Volume 18 (1915), pp. 25-43; Madison Davis, A History
of the Washington City Post-Office, from 1795-1903 (Lancaster, Penna., 1902), pp. 54-56; and the
Bowen Papers, in possession of Professor Charles A. Barker of Baltimore.
8 Daily Morning Chronicle (Washington), April 8, 1867, p. 2.
9 See voter registration in the Chronicle, May 4, 1867, p. 4. Election results by ward were
carried in the New York Times, June 4, 1867, p. 5.
who have always been their benefactors, and whose favor should the more certainly have inspired a sense of gratitude because of its manifest disinterestedness.\footnote{William W. Moore, \textit{Contraband Suffrage; Loyalty of the District of Columbia as Compared with the Several States} (Washington, 1867), p. 8.}

Given a taste of law-making to fit the situation, local Radicals demanded more. Blacks had complained during the election campaign that the city charter prevented them from running candidates for office. Radicals viewed this as a legitimate demand and Congress changed the charter over the veto of Johnson. Radicals also tried to change the time for electing the mayor to odd instead of even numbered years, so that they could have their own man in city hall in 1867 and make a thorough housecleaning of appointive offices. Henry Wilson introduced a bill for that purpose but it failed to pass in that session. Failing to oust the mayor a year early, Radicals demanded that the power of the patronage be effectively removed to the city council which they did control. This bill actually passed but came too late to influence events during the tenure of the conservative mayor.\footnote{The \textit{Congressional Globe} (40th Cong., 1st sess., July 16, 1867, pp. 660-695; July 17, p. 677; and July 18, p. 725) carries discussion and voting on Sumner’s bill to legalize black office-holding in Washington. On Wilson’s bill, see the \textit{Chronicle}, March 2, 1867, p. 2, and March 22, p. 2; and the \textit{Globe}, 40th Cong., 1st sess., May 20, 1867, p. 217. Discussions of the bill to change the patronage system first began in July, 1867 (see \textit{Chronicle}, July 18, 1867, p. 2), and became a matter of Congressional debate that same month (see \textit{Congressional Globe}, 40th Cong., 1st sess., July 17, 1867, p. 698; July 20, pp. 748-49; 40th Cong., 2nd sess., April 7, 1868, pp. 2260-64).} Still, the frequency with which measures desired by the local Radicals were pushed through Congress was startling.

Congress was also prone to legislate social matters for the District. During the war Charles Sumner had legislated equality on the street cars and Congress had created a Negro school system. When the mayor refused to allocate funds for black schools, Congress passed a law permitting the board of trustees of Negro schools to sue him and thus pried a portion of the requisite funds from the reluctant conservatives. A favorite Radical project was Howard University, begun in 1867 at the behest of the New England abolitionist faction within the local Congregational Church led by General O. O. Howard. Legislation was sponsored by several prominent Congressional Radicals and Howard University continued to receive annual appropriations.

Radical politics in Washington peaked between 1868 and 1870, a period which could be legitimately labeled the “Era of Sayles J. Bowen.” Bowen became mayor in 1868 in a hotly disputed election which, at one time, witnessed three mayors and two city councils, each claiming legitimate investiture. The history of that election reads like...
a chronicle of similar elections in the waning years of Reconstruction in Louisiana and South Carolina. Radicals sought to break the deadlock by grasping at a local election law which in effect established the city register as a potential one-man returning board. The register, Frederick Boswell, simply certified the Radical slate and Bowen then seized possession of city hall. Possession became nine-tenths of the law and remained so until Congress obligingly legalized what had existed in fact for several weeks.\textsuperscript{12}

The legitimacy of the result of the election of 1868 has been obscured by time but the importance has not. Conservatives regarded it as a steal. Radicals were no longer sullenly tolerated, they were looked on as political bandits as were their Negro allies. Conservatives charged that Radicals had stolen votes by importing masses of blacks from the farms of Maryland and Virginia to vote illegally. They alleged that Negro violence had intimidated white voters. "Carnival of Blood," screamed the \textit{Express}, while the \textit{Courier} asserted that "The races are now pitted against each other in deadly animosity..."\textsuperscript{13} Of course Radical papers hotly denied these charges and the historian must piece together the actual scenario from circumstantial evidence. The allegations in fact originated with the election of 1867, which was by outside accounts eminently quiet and respectable. They were dredged up annually and repeated almost verbatim in the conservative press as long as elections continued in Washington.

The fact is that Bowen did not need such tactics to win. The disinterest of conservatives meant that a concerted get-out-the-vote campaign among legitimate black voters would be enough to defeat them. Bowen built a machine on such tactics. On election morning Radical politicians and ward healers would round up Negro voters into virtual platoons and march them to the polls. First in line, Negroes were first to vote, while fastidious whites, to avoid "being compelled to sandwich in between the negroes"\textsuperscript{14} generally left the morning hours to the Republicans. Whites could still vote, if they wanted to return and stand under the broiling June sun. The success of these tactics was spelled out in the election results in which Negroes voted far in excess of their population percentage.

Washington had been extensively torn up during the war and citizens of all political complexions were demanding public improvements. Bowen’s political plan was to emphasize public improvements, thus winning over whites while providing the Negro immigrants with

\textsuperscript{12} All Washington’s newspapers were filled with election news during the entire month of June, 1868, but the victorious \textit{Chronicle} carried the story more thoroughly than others.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Evening Express} (Washington), June 3, 1868, p. 4; \textit{The Georgetown Courier}, June 6, 1868, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Express}, June 2, 1868, p. 4.
jobs. Contractors began regrading streets, laying sewers and building bridges, filling their laboring rolls with the blacks who were streaming into the city. That some improvements were effected could not be denied. But Bowen's program became hopelessly entangled in controversy and he never received credit for what was actually accomplished. Conservatives criticized the sudden leap in city expenditures and derided this black WPA unmercifully. One said: "In Mayor Bowen's period a great quantity of negroes were colonized just before the elections to pick grass out of the o'ergrown gutters with case knives, which, at the polls, were employed for a little effective terrorizing. This led Governor Shepherd to say that a few able-bodied geese could do more highway work than all Bowen's multitude." Labor rolls did seem to swell just before elections, owing partly to the mere thirty day residence requirement for voting legislated as part of the Negro suffrage law for Washington.

Criticism of Bowen's administration increased in 1869 when a minor politician accused Bowen of collusive contracting and misappropriating government funds. Bowen was formally exonerated by a city council filled with his supporters but the corruption charge clung to him for the rest of his life. His support splintered badly during his last year and he was thrown out of office in 1870 by a reform ticket headed by a conservative Republican. This ticket received wide support among every political faction in the city, white and Negro. Radical Reconstruction in Washington was over.

Congressional Radicals could regard themselves as the spiritual fathers of the Washington experiment. They had worked closely with the local Radicals, had provided guidance and direction, and passed the framework of laws which made it all possible. But as Bowenism careened toward oblivion, conservative newspapers wrote gleefully that the Congressional leadership refused to be seen with Bowen any longer. The national leaders did not deign to reply to this sort of commentary but neither did they legislate to keep the local Radicals in power. Fewer Congressional Republicans participated in the campaign of 1870 in behalf of Bowen and national Republican leader

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15 For example, ward fund expenditures, which functioned as pork barrels for ward politicians, rose from under $500,000 per year under Bowen's predecessor to over one million dollars per year under Bowen. (Extracted from Washington, D. C., Council, Laws of the Corporation of the City of Washington, Vols XII (1864-1868) and XIII (1868-1871).


Benjamin Brown French, commissioner of public buildings in Washington, mused that "Although Mayor Bowen is my personal friend, and I esteem him highly, he was surrounded by such dishonest influences, that I regarded it dangerous to the city to re-elect him. . . ."\(^{18}\)

Nationally the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876 signaled the effective end to a Reconstruction experiment which had been failing for several years. Good Republicans continued to wave the bloody shirt and to repeat slogans of racial equality but the central interest of the party appeared to shift toward business pursuits. The change in Washington antedated Hayes' election by six years. Leadership of local political affairs devolved upon a collection of businessmen headed by a former plumber named Alexander Robey Shepherd. Boss Shepherd represented a new breed which was becoming increasingly common throughout northern Republican circles, the businessman-politician. His closest ties were with businessmen, his goal was to rejuvenate Washington and make it the trade center its founders had envisioned. Shepherd regarded himself as more faithful to Republican principles than Bowen had been. He intensely disliked Bowen, Bowenism and Radicalism. His conservative wing of the party had maintained a tenuous relationship with Bowen but they were never very comfortable. With Bowen the target of corruption charges, Shepherd became one of the leaders of open revolt in 1870, offering as an alternative to Bowen one Matthew G. Emery, a stone mason and architect whose considerable personal fortune and well-known rectitude would put him above paltry financial gain in the mayor's office.

After the election of Emery, Shepherd busied himself with his ultimate objective, the creation of the Territory of Washington. Under the Territory, which Congress created in 1871, nearly all power was lodged in positions appointed by the President, especially a Board of Public Works to which Grant obligingly appointed Shepherd. The Board supervised the public improvements while leaving less important matters to a popularly elected but relatively impotent legislature. Washingtonians clearly understood that the role of elections was to be minimized without directly confronting that Radical shibboleth, black suffrage. Many blacks protested but to no purpose. Shepherd tried to keep blacks content by buying them off with patronage. And indeed many blacks did well in that regard. Approximately one-third of all city employees were Negroes, who filled the ranks of lamplighters, street sweepers and garbage collectors. The Negro elite did especially

\(^{18}\) Library of Congress, Benjamin Brown French papers, diary, entry of June 10, 1870.
In time Negroes came to understand that Shepherd’s Territory was not the legitimate successor to the Radical-Negro alliance. The thrust was all wrong. Negroes cared about civil rights and political activism but Shepherd did not. He carefully avoided pronouncements about race relations. After a century we still do not know where he stood personally on any of the racial issues which agitated his time. The civil rights legislation passed during his hegemony may be viewed as essentially disconnected from the thrust of his objectives. He took no part in the debate, gave no instructions to his supporters, and apparently cared nothing for the outcome.

The Congressional investigations which ultimately led to Shepherd’s departure revealed how shamefully Negroes had been used. Under Shepherd, elections still resembled a parade ground with contractors and ward healers acting as drill masters. Witness after witness described the process of coercion by which uneducated black laborers were convinced that their interests lay in keeping in power the regime that was paying their wages. They were propagandized prior to the election, then marched to the polling places in the best Bowenite style. When asked if Negro voters were brought up to the polls in bodies, a Negro minister innocently answered: “No, Sir, they came up two abreast.” Though Shepherd’s tactics were not technically illegal, they constituted a classic case of voter railroading.

The investigations revealed extensive fraud, and though no one linked Shepherd himself with missing public funds, nearly all his associates were touched by scandal. When the second Congressional investigation closed in 1874, the local government was bankrupt and discredited. The investigating committee recommended that the city charter be revoked forthwith and local government in the capital be assumed by a board of commissioners. A shocked Congress enacted legislation for the purpose with little debate and the District lost home rule for a hundred years.21

Though Shepherd eventually regained his reputation, Washington’s

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19 Lists of city office-holders are interspersed throughout the Letters of the Territorial Governor (letters sent), National Archives, record group 351. Names were compared with racial annotations in the Washington city directory for 1872. The Shepherd papers in the Library of Congress reveal determined support among the Negro elite in Washington, even during the last days of the Territory, when his political support was disintegrating.


Negroes never survived the collapse of the Territory. White Washingtonians had been relieved to see the old Corporation go, convinced that Negro suffrage had brought it down. They were similarly anxious to see home rule withdrawn in 1874, to bring to an end what they supposed to be Negro electoral domination of their city. They never fully understood that Negroes under Shepherd had exercised little independence and rarely influenced the direction of events. Instead, they blamed Negroes for the corruption of Shepherd’s regime. This legend got its start in Shepherd’s own newspaper, the Star. The Star reported that on the final day of the Territorial legislature members dragged everything away that was not nailed down. “One member in his solicitude to preserve some memento of this last representative body . . . took away a large feather duster, and not to be ostentatious about it, he concealed the same upon his person with considerable ingenuity by passing the handle down a trouser-leg and buttoning the feather-end snugly under his vest . . . And thus departs the last vestige of the ge-lorious right of suffrage in the D. of C.” The Star branded this the “Feather-Duster Legislature” and the phrase was used in later years to symbolize what Washingtonians thought they had seen—a government dominated by Negroes. It was simple enough for embarrassed Shepherdites (and nearly everyone had been a Shepherdite at one time or another) to blame the relatively powerless legislature and to ignore the fact that only two of its twenty-two members were black.

We do not, of course, know just what ran through the minds of the Congressional Radicals when on a June day in 1874 they voted to terminate the first Reconstruction experiment. Their vote was overwhelming but in those confused days no one was talking much about Negro suffrage in the District, so heavily did the issue of financial corruption seem to weigh in their deliberations. Perhaps they were loosing faith in Reconstruction and found the Shepherd fiasco a simple way to end it. When Radicals under the leadership of Levi P. Morton later tried to re-introduce popular suffrage in the District, conservatives struck back with resounding rhetoric. Said Samuel Randall of Pennsylvania: “…but the question remains that universal suffrage was first tested in this District, that the law for this District was the pioneer law of those afterward embraced in the reconstruction acts, and that now—strange to say—the very first place we find it stricken out is the very place where the pioneer law on the subject was put into the statute-book.” Some Radicals scrambled to get Reconstruction back on track. Said Aaron A. Sargent of California on Negro suffrage

22 Star, June 23, 1874, p. 2.
23 Congressional Record, 44th Cong., 1st sess., June 19, 1876, p. 3891.
in the District: “If we take the position that it is not desirable that there shall be suffrage in this District... by the most authoritative method we send out word throughout the South to our friends there who have been struggling under adverse circumstances... that we have banished it; that we have no confidence in it.”24 Despite this clear challenge, Congress did not renew the right of suffrage in the District. Congress obliquely admitted the failure of its experiment in its birth place.

In Washington one may read a history of Reconstruction in brief. The Washington experience foreshadowed in nearly every respect the subsequent Southern experiences.

24 Ibid., 43rd Cong., 2nd sess., December 21, 1874, p. 165.