

Prologue: Fall 1883

The sky was dark and the clouds threatened rain on the morning of October 1, 1883. The tobacco fields around Petersburg, Virginia were bare, the broad, sticky leaves curing in nearby barns, while the white tufts of cotton still sat on their scraggly, sienna-brown stalks.

George Freeman Bragg looked at the brick building in the center of these fields, on top of what he now thought of as University Hill, and couldn't help being pleased. He didn't care about the weather or the crops that almost always needed attention. He was neatly dressed in a suit, with his hair parted and combed down, an attempt at looking older and wiser than his twenty years. He'd come to this place outside of the small, southern Virginia city to celebrate Black education and advancement, and to report on the opening of the new Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute.

When he was a toddler before the end of the Civil War, people had once had no opportunity but to toil in those fields, and after that, their education was supposed to be about a vocation. The great abolitionist and newspaper editor Frederick Douglass had once argued that "we must become mechanics; we must build as well as live in houses; we must make as well as use furniture; we must construct bridges as well as pass over them, before we can properly live or be respected by our fellow men." Bragg felt differently.

While the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia offered a vocational education for Black students, it wasn't enough. Bragg felt that "our own people need to see us doing all those things of a higher order which they see white men doing"—that is, reading Classical literature, engaging in the arts, becoming lawyers and businessmen, or running a newspaper, like he did—"in order to be convinced of the inherent ability of the race, and to have their ambition stimulated."

This was what the new college would offer, and it thrilled Bragg and the other Black leaders gathered. This would be "a new era in the educational life" of Black Virginians, Bragg thought, offering a public college education for Black students, which at the time was only available to be people like him at colleges like the integrated Oberlin in Ohio or the segregated Howard University in Washington, DC.

Bragg had been a page in the Virginia legislature when the coalition of white and Black politicians passed the bill. The Civil War had ended just eighteen years ago, and the Conservatives had nearly ruined the dream of equal rights for Black Americans a few times in

the intervening years. Bragg had seen the lynchings, the beginning of the Jim Crow laws, and the disenfranchisement of Black voters. But in 1879, two years after federal troops left the South and the federal government considered all the white former Confederates “reconstructed,” William Mahone created a new party and a new vision for Virginia. The former Confederate General who likened himself to Napoleon (and had about the same stature) brought together a coalition of working-class white folks from the cities, white folks who lived in the mountains of Virginia, and Black people of all classes to create the Readjuster Party. For Bragg, it represented “the best plan ever proposed by anyone for an amicable and just settlement of political relationships between two races in the South.”

It was Mahone who insisted that government money shouldn't go to just paying debts, but to funding schools for Black and white students. It was Mahone who listened to Black leaders and agreed that Black people with mental illness shouldn't be kept in prisons, but a facility designed to deal with mental illness, rudimentary as it was. It was Mahone who insisted that men shouldn't be taxed to vote. It was Mahone who had orchestrated the bill to create the new college. It was Mahone who brought together “in such a brotherhood way the two races, and in action, demonstrate efficient and helpful cooperation,” according to Bragg.

In Bragg's home city of Petersburg, the Readjusters had modernized the city, paving streets and fixing the water system, adding sidewalks and a city park. Bragg had decided in 1878 that he'd help Mahone however he could, and he'd been rewarded with a the job as a page. In 1882, Bragg had been the one to place the bill for the school's creation on the speaker's desk, and here he was, just over a year later, celebrating the school's opening.

Seventy students would enter the school, and Bragg was equally proud that the president, principal, vice principal and instructors were Black. This wasn't the case at Hampton, and Bragg felt that these role models were necessary to show the students what they could accomplish. These students, Bragg imagined, had “a right and duty to aspire to the higher as well as the lower walks of life.”

What could this new era bring? The state had been devastated after the war: the infrastructure that the state had spent so much money on was destroyed; the fields lay barren; the state had no way to educate kids, white or Black. The Conservatives had made it worse, saying they should pay back debts rather than fund schools; whipped citizens as punishment for small crimes like

petit larceny; put a poll tax so any poor man couldn't vote; made a Virginia that looked backwards, not forwards.

The Readjusters had brought in a new way of life, one that truly aspired to uphold the constitution, that Black men and women were citizens, that the state of Virginia could not deny them "life, liberty, or property," that they had the right to vote. They had all-Black education institutions, they could educate Black lawyers to defend Black men, they could own property, they had voted in Black men to the State House. Could one of these graduates go on to be president of a railroad company? Owner of a cotton mill or tobacco factory? Chief of Police? A United States Senator? Could they make this type of coalition of lower class white people and Black people a model for states across the South? Could they finally drive old Dixie down and win the principles on which the Civil War was fought?

In early October 1883, standing on this hill, the possibilities and hope seemed endless.
