2019

Architect of the New South: The Life and Legacy of William Mahone

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Architect of the New South: The Life and Legacy of William Mahone

A thesis submitted in partial requirements for the degree of Master of History at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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9 May 2019

Acknowledgements

Over the course of this project, I have been blessed with the support of several very kind and intelligent people, and it is with pleasure that I acknowledge them now, however inadequately. I owe an immeasurable professional and personal debt to my advisor: Dr. Kathryn Shively. Her support of my ideas, when all they consisted of was a vague interest in General Mahone, was the spark for this entire project, and her unwavering support since has been an inspiration to me and made this thesis far better than I ever hoped it could be.

I must also thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Nicole Turner, and Dr. John Coski. This thesis would surely be far worse off if not for the foundation that was laid in Dr. Turner’s excellent class on historical memory. Her supervision was essential in turning me on to new archives and encouraging me to broaden my approach outside of William Mahone’s personal story. Every chance I have gotten to speak with Dr. John Coski has been an absolute pleasure. His unbridled enthusiasm for the Civil War is contagious, and I am truly fortunate that he was willing to read this work and serve on my committee.

This project would have been impossible without the generous financial support of the VCU History Department’s Schilling Fund and Duke University’s John Hope Franklin research grant. I am forever grateful to both institutions and the archivists at Duke, The University of Virginia, and right here in Richmond at the Library of Virginia and Virginia Museum of History and Culture who assisted me on my visits.

From a young age, I have been exceedingly lucky to have a true best friend in every sense of the term. Colin Puckett has read more of my work than anyone else throughout my time in college and graduate school, even when he would certainly rather be doing anything else. I am sincerely thankful for his friendship and his knack for tidying up my prose!

My dear parents have always supported me in every aspect of my life. I can only hope that the completion of this project brings them joy and perhaps some relief as well. This work is for them and for my late grandparents: William and Jacqueline Perdue and Howard and Cecilia Anderson. The debt I owe to them is one I can never repay, and their memories remain with me always.
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Abstract

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In Virginia following the Civil War, white and black people formed complex and shifting alliances based on their own self-interests that cut across the lines of established political parties. In this turbulent atmosphere, William Mahone forged a new biracial political coalition called the Readjuster Party in order to transform Virginia’s economy so that it would be competitive in the years to come. Chapter One argues that Mahone’s experience as a soldier and railroad man gave him the political clout needed to enter politics and an industrial vision for Virginia’s future that was markedly different from many of his contemporaries. Chapter Two argues that William Mahone’s leadership of the Readjuster Party, and its advocacy of universal male suffrage and economic reform, created a new political center in Virginia and demonstrates that the actions of both white and black people cannot be viewed as a monolith in the postwar era. Chapter Three demonstrates how William Mahone’s political career was excluded from white Virginians’ narrative of Reconstruction following his death because it provided a historical example of African American suffrage and an attempt to establish fair elections that clashed with Virginia’s established white supremacist social order.
Introduction

![Maj. General William Mahone 1865](Civil War Photographs, National Archives, 111-B-2028)

With Virginia’s economy in ruins and its antebellum social order destroyed in the aftermath of The Civil War, many white Virginians despaired and clung fast to their old values and traditions. However, others accepted their new reality and forged ahead into this period that scholars have termed “the New South,” and William Mahone was one of these men. A former Confederate general, who had ended the war as a hero among white southerners for his victory in the Battle of the Crater, Mahone wasted no time in building a successful railroad business in Virginia and organizing the political compromise that returned Virginia to the United States. When his business interests collapsed, William Mahone reinvented himself, organizing a third-party movement known as the Readjuster Party in Virginia. The Readjusters lowered the state’s debt, funded public education and hospitals for white and black people, and advocated for universal male suffrage. However, there was tension beneath the surface. Mahone’s political
actions alienated many of his former comrades in the Confederate army and white Virginians generally. Before a statewide election in 1883, white Democrats’ fears over increased black participation in politics resulted in the massacre of at least four unarmed black men in Danville Virginia. Shortly thereafter, at a polling place, Mahone was struck in the face by a white man who was only chased off after a scuffle with Mahone’s own son. In the subsequent election, the Readjusters were soundly defeated and Mahone, the former Confederate hero, was labeled by the Democrats for the rest of his life as a traitor.¹

My research uses William Mahone’s life as a lens to examine this period of Reconstruction in Virginia and its historical memory. I argue that when confronted by the social, economic, and political impasse that faced Virginia after the Civil War, William Mahone pioneered a new way forward for the state when he embraced a vision of an industrialized Virginia and advocated for fair elections and universal male suffrage. His leadership of the Readjusters demonstrates that he accepted the Republican Party’s vision for Reconstruction and attempted to establish a lasting two-party system of government in the South. The Readjusters’ industrial vision, overtures to black people, and defense of their suffrage represented a struggle between Mahone’s vision for the New South and the Democrats’ loyalty to the old. Much of the Readjusters’ agenda was also popular among poor whites, and Mahone was only defeated because of elite Democrats’ aggressive appeals to the white supremacist inclinations of these white Virginians. With Mahone defeated by 1889, Democrats initiated the legal process through which nearly all of Virginia’s black population, and many of its poor whites, were

disenfranchised by the turn of the twentieth century. With disenfranchisement came the exclusion of William Mahone from the history of Reconstruction taught by proponents of the Lost Cause and printed in countless school textbooks. William Mahone’s policies might have aided black Virginians, but his relationship with them was fundamentally based on his desire to secure the black vote by promising them federal patronage and not guided by a genuine desire to restructure Virginia’s social order that protected white supremacy. Nevertheless, Mahone’s pragmatism cannot obscure the fact that the policies he approved as leader of the Readjusters employed black Virginians and funded their education on a level previously unseen in Virginia. The result of these actions was the last alternative Virginia had to control by a small number of white Democrats and nearly complete disenfranchisement.

In the fractious political scene in postwar Virginia, where Party allegiance often counted for less than economic, ideological, and racial concerns, whether William Mahone was viewed as a champion of liberalism and universal suffrage or as a traitor to his native state depended on the year and to whom you were talking. Mahone prospered in this turbulent political and economic scene in Virginia thanks to his pragmatic personality. His small and frail figure belies his immense ambition which he committed to reforming Virginia’s economy through his beloved railroads, and later through politics. Prior to the Civil War, after becoming a railroad president at the age of just twenty-seven, Mahone felt destined for greater things than his upbringing as a tavern-keeper’s son might have suggested. Upon the conclusion of the conflict, which he ended in Robert E. Lee’s council, he used his experience during the war combined with his immense wealth as a railroad magnate to influence state politics and both Democrat and Republican politicians saw him as a potential powerful ally. Mahone recognized the benefit of having allies in multiple camps and viewed his pragmatic approach to politics as being in Virginia’s best
interests. However, this approach earned him many enemies over time, especially among white Democrats, who were much less open to Mahone’s willingness to work with Republicans and black people. The Democrats heaped every abuse imaginable upon Mahone over his twenty-five-year political career until Mahone and the Republicans were defeated in the state. So successful was this Democrat propaganda that the positive reception his policies received among black people and many whites as well went largely forgotten, as another footnote in the failures of Reconstruction. William Mahone worked within Virginia’s postwar political system that was based on white supremacy, a racial order that he was a part of, but he believed the future prosperity of Virginia required cooperation or at least toleration between white and black people. Mahone’s acceptance of universal male suffrage, support of public education, and work with the Republican Party makes plain that the actions and motivations of former Confederates and white southerners were highly complex between the end of the Civil War and the segregation of the twentieth century.²

Several scholars have informed my interpretation of William Mahone’s life before his political career, but they focus on the rivalries Mahone was involved in during the Civil War and my work carries these debates over into the Readjuster period. Peter Carmichael provides a framework for thinking about the motivations of Mahone’s generation of white Virginians. He argues that this generation felt less of an attachment to the antebellum South and wished to reform its economy and society. However, Carmichael’s examples do not cover the political

² Nelson Morehouse Blake, *William Mahone of Virginia: Soldier and Political Insurgent* (Richmond: Garret and Massie, 1935), 1-38. Blake’s biography is the only one on Mahone and the best coverage of his early life and railroad career. Just before he turned 18 William Mahone obtained a state scholarship to the Virginia military Institute and graduated in 1847. Two years after this William Mahone began his career as a railroad man when he worked as civil engineer for the Orange and Alexandria Railroad in 1849 at the age of twenty-four. He had a steady and successful career in railroading during the 1850s and was promoted to President of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad Company in April of 1860.
infighting between these men. I argue that William Mahone represented a more radical departure from tradition than any member of this generation that Carmichael highlights. Kevin Levin and Kenneth Noe argue that Mahone’s alignment with the North and the Republicans insulted the antebellum conception of honor of ex-Confederates, such as Lt. Gen. Jubal Early, and precipitated the Readjusters’ collapse. My work demonstrates that Mahone the politician was an expert at adapting to changing circumstances and attacks against his martial record or allegiance to Virginia were not the decisive reason for his political downfall. Mahone prospered under ex-Confederate governor James Kemper and wielded large political influence in the state much to the chagrin of Jubal Early and others. Mahone’s Confederate service contributed to his legacy as a “traitor” to the white South only after he had aligned himself with the Republicans and black suffrage in the 1880s.³

William Mahone’s leadership of the Readjusters was the most successful period of Reconstruction that took place after the Civil War, but scholarship on Reconstruction by Eric Foner and Mark Summers ends Reconstruction in 1877, before the Readjusters came to power, making a nuanced understanding of their impact difficult. My thesis fits within recent scholarship by Hillary N. Green, Gregory Downs and others who argue that Reconstruction was a longer struggle for black rights that encompasses the Readjuster Party. My work combines the timelines of these scholars and shows how William Mahone structured the Readjusters to appeal

to the Republican Party on economic and racial issues and how his leadership sustained the movement after the traditional end of Reconstruction.4

Multiple scholars have focused on William Mahone and the Readjusters, but their scope tends to be limited to one aspect of Mahone’s life, whereas my work synthesizes the scholarship on William Mahone into a cohesive whole. Scholars typically present Mahone and the Readjusters as a case study within larger arguments, and this limits the analytical possibilities of using Mahone and the Readjusters as the frame for a study of Virginia during this period. Third-Party movements in the South, like the Readjusters, and the opportunities they presented were initially analyzed by renowned southern historian C. Vann Woodward in his Origins of the New South. The 1970s saw scholars Jack Maddex, Carl N. Degler, and James Tice Moore reinterpret the Readjusters in Woodward’s framework by focusing on the accomplishments of the party in the realm of universal male suffrage and economic reform, but they were essentially top down studies of Mahone and leading Conservative Party figures only. They also neglected to consider voting data for the period following the Readjusters’ collapse to gauge the movement’s impact and its consequences for Mahone’s later political career as a Republican. Recent scholarship by Jane Dailey, Steven Hahn, and William Blair remains quite positive on the effects of the Readjusters and Mahone’s leadership, but they use the modern fields of social history and memory to emphasize the actions of black people within the Readjuster movement and its

ultimate limitations within the context of a white supremacist society. However, their approaches also do not present a complete picture of William Mahone’s life. My thesis combines elements from these scholars’ study of Mahone and presents a comprehensive overview of his life and career, which is essential to understanding the complexities of Virginia’s Reconstruction era. Specifically, my work focuses on what factors allowed William Mahone to successfully organize the Readjusters and what his interactions with various factions, and their views of him, meant for the party and his career. This thesis is organized around Mahone’s story, and it adds to the work of past scholarship by showing how he changed over the course of his life to become the most radical, and reviled, white political reformer in the state.

My research demonstrates how white Virginians crafted a collective memory that excluded Mahone’s political legacy because his Republican allegiance and defense of black suffrage did not fit neatly into their Lost Cause ideology that venerated Confederate heroes, and because the Readjusters represented a historical period of black suffrage that white Democrats

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could not reconcile with the establishment of Jim Crow laws in Virginia. Scholars such as Fitzhugh Brundage, Kirk Savage, and David Goldfield frame my analysis of Mahone’s relationship to the Lost cause by arguing that the construction of collective memory by any group is dependent upon picking specific people and events to commemorate that fit a narrative while excluding more controversial ones. As my work shows, it was William Mahone’s political allegiances that made his postwar career incompatible with the Lost Cause. Historian David Blight argues that a concept of Reconciliation existed between white Civil War veterans which allowed them to accept the results of the war without broaching uncomfortable racial issues. However, Mahone’s work as a Republican in the Senate saw a very real battle over the role of black people in southern politics, a role the Readjusters were unwilling to budge on. Thus, Mahone was perhaps the most prominent southern figure to put the war behind him in his political dealings in the 1880s. Mahone was unique in this respect as most prominent ex-Confederates were uncomfortable with any alliance with the Republican Party on racial or economic matters.\footnote{Fitzhugh Brundage, \textit{Where These Memories Grow}: History, Memory, and Southern Identity (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2, 6; See also Fitzhugh Brundage, \textit{The Southern Past}: \textit{A Clash of Race and Memory} (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Kirk Savage \textit{Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves}: \textit{Race, War, And Monument in Nineteenth-Century America} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); David Blight, \textit{Race and Reunion}: \textit{The Civil War in American Memory} (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); The most recent scholarly synthesis on Civil War memory is Caroline Janney’s, \textit{Remembering the Civil War}: \textit{Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); see also Gaines M. Foster, \textit{Ghosts of the Confederacy}: \textit{Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865 to 1913} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).}

This thesis is structured as a biographical analysis of William Mahone’s life and legacy arranged in three chapters. As such it is based on the personal correspondence of William Mahone and his contemporaries. Mahone was the primary organizer of the Readjuster Party, and
his correspondence demonstrates his relationship with his white and black supporters and what each hoped to gain from the other. A consultation of the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion demonstrates how Mahone’s career as a soldier was unremarkable until his service at the Crater and why officers like Jubal Early were offended by his rapid rise to prominence in the war’s last days. Newspapers show that regardless of Mahone’s actions, the dialogue between Readjusters, Republicans, and Democrats was the principle reason the Readjusters aroused so much animosity and racial backlash in Virginia during the 1880s. Newspapers were intensely partisan in the nineteenth century, and both Republican and Democratic newspapers pushed a narrative about the Readjuster Party to appeal to their base. My thesis also consults election returns from 1880-1889 to analyze how white and black Readjusters voted following the party’s defeat and what this meant for Mahone’s leadership of the Virginia Republicans. Additional sources consulted include obituaries, early twentieth century scholarship on Mahone, and school textbooks which I use to track how William Mahone’s legacy changed over time and was excluded from most discussions of Reconstruction in Virginia.

In Chapter One I argue that Mahone’s rise to leader of the Readjusters was made possible through a combination of his Confederate war record and his experience as a railroad magnate. Mahone’s military legacy was important to his success as a politician, but debates with his former comrades about his wartime service were never more important than those over race, and Virginia’s financial situation, that defined the Readjuster Party. Chapter One also argues that Mahone’s status as a railroad magnate gave him substantial influence in Virginia’s politics during the 1870s which he eventually used to assume a leadership role in readjusting the state’s debt. In Chapter Two I argue that Mahone’s leadership of the Readjusters represented the most successful example of Republican Reconstruction in the South and that this was made possible
due to Mahone’s acceptance of a radically different vision of politics in Virginia than most of his white contemporaries. Additionally, I argue that despite the inherent weaknesses of the Readjuster coalition, and Mahone’s divisive personality, the movement did not collapse due to Mahone’s intra-party fights but was defeated by white supremacist violence and legislation in the 1880s. Chapter Three argues that William Mahone and the Readjuster Party have been selectively remembered by white Virginians because Mahone’s legacy as a Confederate general did not fit with his Republican allegiance and promotion of African American suffrage in the 1880s. Mahone’s leadership of the Readjusters challenged the Lost Cause narrative promoted by white southerners by the turn of the century which claimed that Reconstruction had been tyrannical toward the white South and that ignorant black men had imposed their will on Virginia’s white population. Democrats either ignored Mahone’s political career entirely or used it as an example of “negro rule” during Reconstruction and of the dangers of letting the masses vote both black and white. Thus, Mahone’s legacy remained as a Confederate military hero among southern whites and his political career was rarely discussed.

A biographical study of Mahone’s life and career is more than just a simple biography of the man; it helps bridge the gap between the disconnected historiographies of Reconstruction and New South scholarship. William Mahone was a central figure in the ongoing debates over political, economic, and racial issues in Virginia after the Civil War. The contours of these issues changed depending on who was in power, and people like Mahone who found themselves in one party in the 1870s could have very different allegiances in the 1880s. The extended timeline of this thesis helps to capture the sense of hope and promise for a more equitable system of government in the South that black people and Republicans fought for, but it also demonstrates the reality that the politics of white supremacy remained the dominant force in southern politics.
Chapter I: The War and Reconstruction Era Politics 1861-1879

Mahone viewed secession as the means to transform southern society with an eye toward the future, via the elevation of new leaders like himself. Despite the failure of the Confederacy, Mahone’s military success convinced him that he should have an active role in shaping Virginia’s economic and political landscape postwar. After Appomattox, Mahone left the issues of the war behind and turned to railroads and politics to build up Virginia. The influence he acquired through these endeavors never sat well with other ex-Confederates, such as Jubal Early, who viewed Mahone as having accomplished relatively little during the war. Additionally, the squabbling over reputation in the Army of Northern Virginia tempered Mahone for the political battles of his postwar career. Educated at the Virginia Military Institute, William Mahone joined the Confederate armed forces when Virginia seceded and was commissioned as a brigadier general by 1862, but he passed most of the war without distinction. However, his service in 1864 during the Siege of Petersburg elevated him from a relatively unknown Confederate officer to Robert E. Lee's right-hand man, a dramatic rise that Mahone would use to make a decisive impact on Virginia politics for the rest of his life.8

William Mahone and Jubal Early represented two fundamentally different perspectives on what path Virginia should take following the war. Early was a representative of a small but vocal minority of white Virginians who resisted any attempts to work with the North in politics

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8 Joseph T. Glatthaar, General Lees Army: From Victory to Collapse (New York: Free Press, 2008), 353. Mahone played this game as well as any officer in the Army of Northern Virginia. Indeed, Glatthaar recounts how Mahone at one point had the Virginia General Assembly petition Jefferson Davis for an appointment on his behalf; The only biography of Mahone is Nelson Blake’s, William Mahone of Virginia: Soldier and Political Insurgent (Richmond, Va: Garret and Massie, 1935), 13-15. William Mahone was born in Southampton County, Virginia in 1826. He was always a rather peculiar looking figure. As an adult, he stood about 5 foot 6 and weighed around 100 pounds due to digestive problems. His appearance earned him the moniker of “little bantam” among his men, who admired his fiery personality.
or business while Mahone was open to these possibilities. The two men initially clashed over Mahone's portrayal of himself and General Lee in Mahone’s personal memoir, and their differences extended into politics as each man fought to influence Virginia's political direction in the 1880s. For men like Jubal Early, military disputes were inseparable from politics and his harsh attacks against Mahone’s record have somewhat obscured the fact that William Mahone was a competent, if unspectacular, general who adequately defended his war record. It was only his eventual course as a Readjuster, and eventually a Republican Senator, that allowed Early and his other rivals to portray him as one of Virginia’s most odious enemies.\(^9\)

William Mahone's focus on industry and railroads in Virginia, combined with his Confederate legacy, allowed him to influence the Conservative Party in Virginia and act as the driving force behind the signing of a new state constitution that kept Confederate figures like himself in positions of power. Mahone demonstrated substantial political skill during this period which he used to great effect as leader of the Readjusters. Constantly falling in and out of favor with various elected officials and business partners, Mahone was a master manipulator and knew how to adjust his sails to find a new course every time he ran into hardship. Mahone's career as a railroad man and Conservative politician showed that he had no desire initially to turn over Virginia to the Republican Party or northern economic interests. Despite being portrayed as a traitor to his state by many white Virginians due to his Republican allegiance, Mahone never viewed his actions as a betrayal of the late Confederacy, but rather as the means to rebuild the state with himself in a leading role.

\(^9\) For the debates between Mahone and Early following the war see Kevin Levin, “William Mahone, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History,” 378-412; on Early see Gary Gallagher, “Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History: A Persistent Legacy,” in The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History, eds. Gary Gallagher and Alan Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 40.
From Relative Unknown to the “Hero of the Crater:” William Mahone from Secession to Defeat 1861-1865.

Mahone’s postwar antagonists like Jubal Early and David Weisiger repeatedly called him a coward and questioned his war record, but there is no contemporary evidence to support these claims. Prior to his success in 1864, Mahone had failed to distinguish himself as an officer, but he had participated in several battles and was wounded. Mahone and his brigade took an active part in the Seven Days Battles around Richmond, where he led his men at the battle of Malvern Hill in “five separate and distinct charges” against the Union forces.10 His next engagement occurred at the battle of Second Manassas where he was wounded in the chest, which Lt. Gen. James Longstreet described as a “severe wound,” in his praise of Mahone.11 None of these accomplishments gained him special distinction, and Mahone was likely concerned that his military service in the first few years of the war was of little note compared to other officers.

After the war, Mahone regularly referenced his close relationship with Robert E. Lee to bolster his political clout, but this close relationship did not begin until the Petersburg Campaign of 1864. To demonstrate this dramatic change, it is only necessary to look at Mahone’s assignment by Lee to the river defenses at Drewry’s Bluff where he was ordered to share command, something Mahone actively resented. Lee’s orders had directed Mahone to “harmonize these several operations,” of the river’s defenses. This prompted Mahone to write the

10 U.S. War Department, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1880-1901), ser. I, vol. 2, pt. 2:826 (hereafter cited as OR; all references are to volumes in series I). These Confederate attacks were repulsed with staggering losses by Union artillery and gunboats in the water. Following the battle, the commander of the entire Confederate assault, Maj. Gen. “Prince” John Macgruder wrote that “I cannot speak too highly of the officers and men of the three brigades attacking in front,” which included Mahone’s brigade. 11 OR, vol.7, pt. 2:883-898; Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, 45. From this wounding came easily the most well-known anecdote concerning Mahone. Upon learning of his wounding which Virginia Governor Letcher described to Mahone’s wife as a “flesh wound” his wife exclaimed, “It can’t be a flesh wound; the General hasn’t any flesh!”
Secretary of War, explaining that, “I cannot be responsible in any copartnership authority, [and that] engineers should be directed to report to me and made subject to my directions.” Perhaps fed up with not being able to take the initiative Mahone attacked at the Seven Days Battles “without awaiting a definite order,” and then, “withdrew his brigade without any orders,” according to Maj. Gen. A.P. Hill. Hill’s forces held against the federal assault, but he was not pleased with Mahone’s apparently less than adequate support. That evening Mahone decided to stop pursuing federal soldiers to perform further reconnaissance which drew the ire of Maj. Gen. Benjamin Huger, his superior. Huger criticized Mahone’s actions saying, “I was much disappointed that General Mahone had not caused the retreat during the night.” Mahone had clearly seen battle, but his brashness and eccentric character had irritated some of his superiors, and he remained a relative unknown to Robert E. Lee.13

Despite this record, Mahone, and later his biographer, asserted that after Lt. Gen. Stonewall Jackson’s wounding at Chancellorsville, Mahone occupied Jackson’s former place as Lee’s favorite general, citing a poem from 1892 as evidence.14 Mahone’s biographer likely used this comparison to Jackson to help explain Mahone’s prominent place by Lee’s side during the final months of the war, but there is no wartime evidence that Mahone ever occupied Jackson’s

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13 OR, vol. 2, pt. 2:788-798; Douglas S. Freeman, Lee’s Lieutenants: A Study in Command, abrid., Stephen W. Sears (1942; repr., New York: Simon and Schuster Inc, 1998), 137. (Hereafter cited as Lee’s Lieutenants); The emaciated figure of William Mahone only added to the eccentric appearance and lifestyle he led in the army. His health concerns caused him to require a traveling livestock pen from which to prepare special meals for himself. A good description on Mahone’s appearance and attire is Moxley, Sorrel, Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer (1905; repr., Dayton Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1978), 277-278. Sorrel remarked that “His appearance arrested attention. Very small both in height and frame, he seemed a mere atom with little flesh…Sallow of feature, sharp of eye, was the General; in dress quite unconventional, he affected jackets rather than coats…topped off by a large Panama straw hat of the finest and most beautiful texture.” Sorrel also described Mahone’s luxurious eating requirements: “A cow was always by his quarters and laying hens cackled loud, besides many luxuries. Delicate in physique, he had to nourish himself carefully.”
14 Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, 46.
exalted status, and if Mahone was the new Stonewall Jackson then it is surprising that he was not a central part of any of Lee’s plans during the Army of Northern Virginia’s next major engagement at Gettysburg. Mahone was initially responsible for exaggerating his relationship with Lee and Jackson following the war, an intolerable exaggeration for Confederates like Early, whose postwar smears of Mahone ended up in early twentieth-century scholarship. Douglas Freeman wrote in his personal papers that Mahone's actions at Gettysburg led to a “suspicion [in the army] that he [Mahone] sometimes kept them [his men] out of the fighting.” While some of Mahone’s chief antagonists, like Early and David Weisiger, made this assertion, there is limited wartime evidence to support this view. Due to the bitter antagonisms Mahone’s postwar business and political career fostered, it is most likely that the poem was written by Mahone’s defenders and Freeman’s comments colored by anti-Mahone propaganda.  

The Spotsylvania campaign in May 1864 saw Mahone go on the offensive to take credit for himself and his men. Douglas Freeman called Mahone’s ascendancy during this period “as strange a rise to fame as the army witnesses in 1864,” and this increase in responsibility provided Mahone with opportunities to assert his central role in Lee’s army. At Spotsylvania Mahone’s old twelfth Virginia regiment under Brig. Gen. David Weisiger advanced towards a breach in the Confederate’s defensive line known as the “Mule Shoe.” Arriving on the scene they reinforced Brig. Gen. James Lane of North Carolina. At this point, William Mahone arrived at the front lines to check on Weisiger’s men and he believed Lane’s North Carolinians were abandoning

15 OR, vol. 27, pt. 2:621; Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, 44. Douglas Freeman was arguably the preeminent scholar on the Confederacy in the early to mid-twentieth century. While he had a strong bias toward the Lost Cause mythology he was raised in, his portrayals of Confederate figures are thorough, and they give a comprehensive analysis of their military careers. It should be noted that Freeman never criticized Mahone’s military actions in his principal works on the Confederate army, likely because Mahone was of little importance to the Army of Northern Virginia prior to 1864. The harshest criticism of Mahone's military record came from David Weisiger and Jubal Early, with Early’s criticism likely entirely based around postwar exchanges with Mahone.
them, and he shouted that “the damned North Carolinians were deserting his brave Virginians.”

Additionally, Mahone claimed that it had been his men who captured the Union flags and not Lane’s, arousing immense hatred from Lane and the men from North Carolina. He angrily complained about Lane’s alleged incompetence at the Mule Shoe and went after Lane’s immediate superior, Maj. Gen. Cadmus Wilcox. This debate with Mahone engendered a lasting hatred on the part of James Lane, but he would only be able to fully voice it after Mahone’s political support among white Virginians collapsed in the 1880s. Mahone’s fame during the upcoming Petersburg campaign shielded him from all earlier critiques of his record.16

After Spotsylvania, Mahone established himself as the preeminent Confederate commander left at Lee’s disposal. This was in large part because Lee had almost no reliable commanders left to turn to by this point, and Mahone actively criticized his fellow commanders for any perceived shortcomings.17 Once again General Wilcox was his target. On June 22 a combined assault from Mahone and Wilcox’s men was a success, but Mahone was quick to criticize Wilcox for not attacking at the proper moment and perhaps this influenced Lee’s official report which offered praise only for Mahone. In the years following the war, Mahone changed his story of the assault several times to heap more blame on Wilcox. Three years before his death, in 1892, a politically defeated and likely bitter Mahone remarked to a Union veteran that

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16 Freeman, Lee’s Lieutenants, 48. Douglas Freeman also referred to Mahone’s men as the “most renowned shock troops in the army [of Northern Virginia].” This image was essentially based around his men’s participation in the Battle of the Crater; Kenneth Noe, “Damned North Carolinians” and “Brave Virginians”: The Lane-Mahone Controversy, Honor, and Civil War Memory’, The Journal of Military History, vol. 72, no. 4 (October 2008): 1090-1094; Also see Gordon C. Rhea, The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern: May 7-12, 1864. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.), 78-81, 113.

17 For an analysis of the attrition among Lee’s commanders at the start of this campaign see Gary Gallagher, “I Have to Make the Best of What I Have: Robert E. Lee at Spotsylvania,” in The Spotsylvania Campaign, ed. Gary Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5-29; For additional comments on Mahone’s rise to prominence see Lee’s Lieutenants: A Study in Command, 735-737.
when Wilcox asked him where on the field, he should deploy his men Mahone told him to “to go to hell.” For his part, Wilcox maintained that it had been impossible for his men to be where Mahone said they should have been, and he insisted Mahone did not initiate the attack at all. Regardless, of the truth of Mahone’s claims, he had won a great victory and taken all the credit for himself.18

The culmination of Mahone’s growing military record came on the early morning hours of July 30 in what became known as The Battle of the Crater. The Union Army blew up a section of the Confederate line with dynamite to break the ongoing siege warfare around the city of Petersburg. The mine destroyed one Confederate strongpoint at Rives Salient, killing over three-hundred Confederate soldiers and creating a Crater 126 feet long, 87 feet wide, (at the surface) and 25 feet deep. Thousands of Union soldiers flooded into the gaping breach in the Confederate line, however, the initial Union brigades that assaulted the breach milled about in confusion inside of the Crater itself and did not seize key high ground behind the Confederate lines. Mahone’s division was further down the line and orders were dispatched for them to hasten to the breach.19

Mahone’s counterattack, just miles outside of Petersburg, established him as a Confederate hero late in the war, finally giving him the laurels, he craved. However, the execution of United States Colored Troops who surrendered to Mahone’s men stands out in horrific contrast to Mahone’s later political career as the leader of the biracial Readjuster

coalition. The heightened violence of the Petersburg campaign was racially motivated and a somewhat regular occurrence and there is no evidence Mahone nor any other Confederate officer took any measures to prevent this butchery. Previously, Confederate soldiers had murdered fleeing black refugees as they chased Union forces following the first battle of Rheams’ Station, of which Mahone’s command took part, and the Crater would be the brutal culmination of this violence. This was the first major assault carried out by Lee’s men against the USCT and one of Mahone’s men opined that if the black soldiers were not repulsed “life would not be worth living.”

Mahone’s instructions to his men before the assault captured the fear and anger that gripped Confederates when they encountered black soldiers. According to several veterans, he stated the case to his men thusly, “Men, you have got something to do to-day that you have never done before…you have got to fight negroes. Die before you give an inch.” The Petersburg campaign had already seen racially motivated executions, and both sides expected no quarter in the fierce struggle in and around the Crater. As the USCT advanced, audible cries of “No quarter!” and “Remember Fort Pillow!” were heard from their ranks. When initial assaults were unsuccessful, Mahone again reminded his men that “the black troops had cried no quarter,” and he personally led the final assault that won the day for the Confederates. Upon breaking Union resistance in the Crater, the Confederates executed black soldiers they saw until they were “worn out with exhaustion.” After an indeterminate amount of time, numerous accounts testified that,

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20 Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, 58; Greene, A Campaign of Giants, 475, 301. Greene recounts how black refugees were executed following the First Battle of Rheams’ Station about a month earlier with one of Mahone’s men commenting that upon the site of black people “our men became enraged, and it was difficult to restrain them.”; For an analysis of how race contributed to the growing violence of the Civil War in general see Aaron Sheehan-Dean, The Calculus of Violence: How Americans Fought the Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 272-273, 462; For an analysis of the executions of black POWS see Kevin Levin, Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012.)
for reasons that are not entirely clear, Mahone himself ordered the killing to stop. One soldier reported that “General Mahone got sick of the slaughter going on and begged his men to stop killing them.” This account is borne out in numerous primary accounts, with Union officer Colonel Sharpe reporting that “many of the blacks had been killed after surrender; that their slaughter was stopped by General Mahone.” The primary accounts do not specify how many USCT men were killed after surrender or exactly when Mahone came on the scene. It is likely he was simply concerned over having temporarily lost control of his command, but in primary sources, he is portrayed as “mercifully” bringing an end to the killing for the day, as the Confederates recaptured the Crater and sent the surviving Union prisoners to the rear.21

Whatever Mahone’s personal feelings about the black soldiers he fought he could not risk any perception that he did not have control over his men following the battle. He had recently stopped his men from lynching a black camp slave and likely viewed his halting of the post-battle executions in a similar vein. The victory at the Crater would be known Mahone’s grandest achievement in the eyes of his men and white southerners, and Mahone realized he had to present himself as the man of the hour in total control. However, he was not immune to criticism. The local press harshly criticized Mahone’s sparing of even a single black soldier writing, “We regret to learn that some negroes were captured instead of shot…go forward until every negro is

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21 Accounts of the battle from Mahone’s veterans can be found in William H. Stewart, Description of the Battle of the Crater. Recollections of the Recapture of the Lines (Norfolk: Landmark Book and Job Office, 1876), 41-42, 65-66. As Stewart’s book shows, Mahone and his brigade commanders made sure to tell their men that the black soldiers would give no quarter and to recapture the Crater by any means necessary and the bloodlust of the men took care of the rest. As one soldier described: “The orders of Major General Mahone were obeyed to the very letter, the brink of the ditch was gained before a musket was discharged, the cry ‘No quarter!’ greeted us, the one volley responded, and the bayonet plied with such irresistible vigor as insured success in the shortest space of time. Men fell dead in heaps, and human gore ran in streams that made the very earth mire beneath the tread of the victorious soldiers.”; For a detailed account of the entire battle see Greene, A Campaign of Giants, 461, 477, 480, 498, 502; OR, vol. 42, pt. 2:32. Fort Pillow was a battle on April 12, 1864 in Tennessee. Following the Confederate victory, numerous black soldiers were executed under the orders of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forest.
slaughtered.” That his prevention of every black soldier from being executed could be criticized by the local press foreshadowed the future problems Mahone’s biracial political movement would face.22

Mahone’s reputation as “the Hero of the Crater” following the battle demonstrated not only his genuine military success, but also how he had maneuvered himself from a relatively unknown officer to a leading figure in the army through both action and words. However, this rise was not without controversy. Brig. Gen. David Weisiger challenged Mahone’s account of the Crater fight in which Mahone took sole credit for ordering the charge. Weisiger had been wounded in the assault and bitterly asserted that he had ordered the Confederate counterattack and not Mahone. Veterans from the attack nearly all stated that Mahone was front and center in planning the attack, with one writing that “I heard General Mahone’s voice, ‘Charge, Boys.’ He was not over thirty feet from me.” While Mahone ventured into the fray himself, it is apparent that Weisiger’s bitter critiques alerted Mahone to the need to protect his reputation in his preeminent action of the war. Additionally, as the Confederates retreated from Petersburg several months later Mahone again criticized James Lane’s actions in defense of one of the last Confederate forts around Petersburg. While the details of the incident could be interpreted in favor of either general, much like at Spotsylvania, Mahone’s criticism of his fellow officers discredited their importance and emphasized his own leadership. As a result, Mahone emerged

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22 Ervin Jordan, Black Confederates and Afro Yankees in Civil War Virginia (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1999), 277. The black camp slave was named Ben. Ben had struck and killed a Confederate soldier who was attempting to steal the extra rations that Ben was guarding. Apparently “only the intervention of William Mahone prevented Ben from being lynched by the dead soldier’s comrades.”
from the Petersburg campaign as a well-known Confederate hero, while the officers he criticized
did not.23

After Mahone’s successful counterattack at the Crater, Robert E. Lee promoted him to
Major General and relied on him for the remainder of the war, a fact that was likely not forgotten
by Mahone’s fellow officers both during and after the war ended. Lee’s reports frequently
mentioned Mahone’s activities in this period in short, effusive praise. “[Mahone] penetrated the
enemy’s picket-line last night near Petersburg and drove it for half a mile,” reported Lee on
October 31. During the Battle of Sailor’s Creek, where a large part of the remaining Confederate
forces was captured before Appomattox, Mahone came to Lee’s aid. Responding to Lee’s query
“has the army been dissolved?” William Mahone replied, “No general, here are troops ready to
do their duty.” Mahone was part of a final council of war with Generals Lee and Longstreet
about whether to surrender to Union forces. His growing role by General Lee’s side from the
Petersburg campaign to Appomattox likely caused lingering jealousies among many of
Mahone’s former Confederate comrades in the postwar era. Perhaps the most notable in relation
to Lee was Jubal Early. As Lee’s chief defender, Early bitterly opposed Mahone’s recollections
about the war, and later, his politics. It could not have escaped Early’s notice that while Mahone
was promoted after Petersburg, and ever in Lee’s council, Early himself had returned almost

23 William, Stewart, Description of the Battle of the Crater, 55-56; OR, vol. 40, pt. 1:795; For additional
detail regarding the controversy over who ordered the Confederate charge at the Crater see Greene, A
Campaign of Giants, 481. It is probable that both Weisiger and Mahone reacted to the sight of Union
soldiers in the Crater with orders to advance, though most of Mahone’s veterans in 1876 give General
Mahone credit. Weisiger always insisted that he had launched the first charge, and some subsequent
historians have taken this view. For an interpretation in favor of Weisiger’s account see Douglas S.
alone to Petersburg after being defeated in the Shenandoah Valley and was relieved of command by Lee.\(^{24}\)

**William Mahone’s Conception of the Lost Cause**

Considering his close relationship with Lee during the closing stages of the Civil War, and Lee’s growing mythology in the postwar years among white southerners, Mahone’s decision to approve a biographical sketch of himself in 1870 that criticized Lee and promoted his own greatness was a serious miscalculation for the “Hero of the Crater.”\(^{25}\) Prior to his memoir Mahone had organized several reunions of his old brigade in the 1870s and gave his likeness and signature to people seeking to commemorate the Confederate war effort. Mahone likely viewed an exaggerated memoir as another way to build his claim to glory in the late war. However, Mahone's memoir, published in 1870 by New Yorker John Watts De Peyster and Mahone's secretary, S. Bassett French, went too far. It stated that Mahone had been a superior general to both Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee and criticized living Confederate generals including Jubal Early, Cadmus Wilcox, and James Lane. This extravagant praise of Mahone’s martial prowess is typical for the entire memoir: “no man between the oceans, the gulf, and the lakes is a finer illustration of the innate military capacity and adaptability of the American people than the subject of this sketch—William Mahone.” While Mahone was little concerned with the legacies of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, he would soon learn that Jubal Early was. Early

\(^{24}\) *OR*, vol. 42, pt. 2:32; *Freeman, Lee*, 475.

\(^{25}\) Kevin Levin, “William Mahone, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 4 (2005), 391-391. Kevin Levin’s work is the primary analysis of the controversy between Mahone and Jubal Early. Levin noted how Mahone approved of the memoir to raise money for railroads and promote Reconciliation with the North, but that he miscalculated by provoking Early and comparing himself to Lee and Jackson which “violated the tenets of Lost Cause ideology.” Levin argues that despite Mahone’s personal success in politics and the railroads, the Lost Cause ideology that was being defined by Jubal Early held powerful sway over white southerners and it was incumbent upon Mahone to respect its emerging tenets, especially with respect for Robert E. Lee.
challenged Mahone, initiating a rivalry based around two different conceptions of the Lost Cause in Virginia in the postwar era.²⁶

Mahone’s disagreements with Early and other former Confederate generals, were based on the antebellum South’s common concept of honor. In short, southern honor reinforced the loyalty to the antebellum South’s strict social and racial hierarchy. In this hierarchy, a man’s social standing was dependent on his loyalty to the community and his neighbors’ perceptions of him. Therefore, Mahone’s public criticisms of Jubal Early and other officers following the war were a deep affront to the manhood and social status of these men and had to be answered vociferously. That the concept of honor was vitally important in Virginia, despite men like Mahone who cared little for it, was apparent in his later political career. A decade after his initial exchange with Early over his personal memoir, Mahone’s willingness to consider a drastic reduction or even a complete repudiation of the state’s wartime debt and his advocacy for fair elections again challenged the honor of Virginia in the eyes of traditional Conservatives. Thus, the dispute with Jubal Early over Mahone’s memoir was the first incident in what would be a long career of Mahone upsetting the social controls of honor and white supremacy inherent in southern society.²⁷

Jubal Early was more concerned with the honor of the old South and of the Confederacy than perhaps any other Confederate veteran, and he positioned himself as the arbiter of what could and could not be said by Confederate veterans about the war through his own voluminous

²⁷ My discussion of southern honor in this thesis is based on the work of Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s Honor and Violence in the Old South (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); For the specific contours of the debate between Mahone and Confederate veterans besides Early see Noe, “Damned North Carolinians” and “Brave Virginians,” 1089-1115.
writings in the Southern Historical Society Papers, which contained endless debate over wartime issues. William Mahone’s self-aggrandizing memoir, with its snub of Early, Lee, and Stonewall Jackson, was a direct challenge to Early’s own military record and the Lost Cause ideology that he had created. This ideology was based around a few basic principles designed to vindicate the wartime actions of Confederate heroes. Early argued the two most well-known positions: Robert E. Lee was a legendary general beyond reproach, and the Confederacy’s war effort was doomed to failure in the face of overwhelming odds. In the spring of 1871, Early read Mahone’s memoir and bristled at its deification of Mahone. He then wrote to Mahone about the memoir’s assertion that Mahone did not like to fight under Early because he had “a disputatious order of mind…delay was the consequence at times, when the battle might be fought and won.” When Mahone received Jubal Early’s caustic letters, he realized he had neither the ability nor the time to win a war of words with the ornery general and admitted to De Peyster that he was “greatly to blame in the first place for not giving the matter attention [or this] could have been avoided.”

Mahone replied to Early that he had not read the memoir closely and meant no offense, but Early was far from satisfied and replied, calling Mahone a fraud and a coward who outright lied about his prominence in numerous engagements. “No man can now doubt your propensity for blowing your own horn, with the accompaniment of some very small whistles,” wrote Early.

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28 Gary Gallagher, “Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History: A Persistent Legacy,” 40.
Mahone’s memoir represented that despite Early’s prominence in the formation of its major tenets, the Lost Cause was not any one set of ideas in the postwar years. For William Mahone, the value of the war’s legacy was that it could bolster his credibility as a businessman among white Virginians. Mahone was focused on expanding Virginia’s economy through his railroads and likely authorized the memoir as a means of simple self-promotion. However, what men wrote about the war was everything to hardliners like Jubal Early, who also disagreed with economic cooperation with the United States. Mahone’s industrial plans were supported by many white Virginians, but Mahone realized he would have to be more careful in how he promoted his military career. Generals like Lee and Jackson were sanctified in the Confederate pantheon by Jubal Early, and Mahone’s spat with Early alerted him to this. Thus, while Early’s writing
shaped white Virginians’ views about their Confederate heroes, Mahone’s success in business spoke to the popularity of industrialization among white Virginians, reforms that Jubal Early shunned. Mahone edited his memoir to comply with Early’s criticisms and turned his full attention toward his railroad and political pursuits in the 1870s. He assured Early that “you may see that it was never my intention to do you and other Confederate officers the injustice which appears in the article.” When Mahone next wrote about the war, he would focus on his relationship with Robert E. Lee to argue that he pursued a postwar career that would have met with Lee’s approval.

Republication of the revised memoir defended Mahone from Early’s wrath by removing the offending passages, but there was one aspect of his military career he refused to compromise on after the war, his role at the Battle of the Crater. When General Cadmus Wilcox and others asserted that Mahone had been too slow in response to the detonation of the Union mine at Petersburg, Mahone responded in several newspapers where he claimed, “no order had been given to hold my division in readiness to move at a moment’s notice.” He argued that he had responded as quickly as possible under the circumstances and published numerous letters from veterans that supported his position. One such veteran, W. Gordon McCabe, reaffirmed that Mahone deserved full credit for the counterattack at the Crater and that this “was never a question in the army.” Mahone also stated he was Lee’s most reliable subordinate at the Crater, a strategy that would defend him from attacks from Jubal Early and one he employed more frequently as he became involved in politics. The letter from McCabe also served this purpose.

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31 A Correspondence Between General Early and Mahone, In Regard to the Military Memoir of the Latter (n.p., 1871), 18.
because he was with Lee during Mahone’s counterattack and reported that, upon learning of Mahone’s men leading the charge, Lee expressed satisfaction and said, “I thought so.” Examples of Lee's trust and praise of Mahone's service at the Crater, combined with the revised memoir, ensured that Mahone's reputation as a Confederate general would be safe from further criticism for the remainder of the decade.\textsuperscript{32}

The exchange with Early was embarrassing for Mahone, but it did not sink his reputation among white Virginians and Confederate veterans. Mahone’s correspondence after the republication of his memoir demonstrated that he had successfully defended his reputation as the Hero of the Crater. In the years following his debate with Early, Mahone received numerous letters referencing his service, with the Virginia legislature offering to have a special vote to honor the service of “your gallant brigade.”\textsuperscript{33} In the 1870s, Mahone used his military legacy to his advantage, with several reunions with the Crater veterans that complemented his railroad and political scheming, but he only returned to discussing his role in the war when he was forced to reinvent himself as leader of the Readjusters in 1879. This reinvention under the banner of a new political party awakened the vitriol of many ex-Confederates he had sparred with in the past, all

\textsuperscript{32} William Mahone, “Reply to a Communication Published by General. C.M. Wilcox,” \textit{New Orleans Times}, Jan 1, 1872, folder 3, box 1, Mahone Family Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond Virginia. (Hereafter cited as LV); J. Watts De Peyster, “A Military Memoir of William Mahone, A Major General in the Confederate Army,” \textit{New York Historical Magazine}, July 1871, p. 26. Mahone’s revised memoir stated that from the Petersburg campaign to the war’s end Lee accepted Mahone’s advice about troop deployments and that he “never failed to express his appreciation of Mahone.”

\textsuperscript{33} (?) to William Mahone, April 13, 17, 1875, Box 11, Papers of the Mahone-McGill Families, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at The University of Virginia, Charlottesville Va. (Hereafter cited as UVA); S. Basset French to William Mahone, May 17, 1875, Box 11, UVA. Mahone’s dear friend and author of the troublesome memoir, S. Bassett French said that “I almost felt like crying,” upon hearing Mahone speak at one such event; James Lawson Kemper to William Mahone, June 7, 1875, Box 12, UVA. Like many other friends and associates of Mahone, French himself had fallen on hard times and Governor Kemper wrote Mahone asking if something might be done to prevent French and his family “from being turned out of doors to either starve or enter the poor house?” Mahone apparently assisted French by appointing his son to a railroad job and he also appointed numerous officials in Petersburg during this time at Governor Kemper’s request.
of whom were loyal members of the Conservative Party and would organize against Mahone during the Readjuster years.34

**William Mahone: Railroad Tycoon and Political Organizer**

While the defense of his Confederate legacy was important to William Mahone, his true interest was in developing Virginia's railroads and making the state economically competitive again following the devastating war, acts that would of course personally benefit Mahone himself. Throughout these years Mahone supported the Conservative Party and showed no inclination to realign himself with the Republican Party (even though Republicans championed most of his economic goals). Mahone used his prewar railroad acumen to build a postwar railroad monopoly in Virginia, which garnered him extensive influence in Virginia’s politics. Mahone knew reunion was the surest way to acquire the northern investment his railroads needed, and he used his influence to help organize the compromise that allowed Virginia to be readmitted to the United States with Confederate veterans’ voting rights restored. These years following the war give us several important insights into what motivated Mahone and what the Readjusters’ success depended on, his own immense ambition. Before analyzing Mahone's role in the Conservative Party, and the importance of the expanding railroad lines during this period, it is necessary to briefly situate Virginia in the process of Reconstruction.35

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34 “One of his Old Brigade Speaks,” Scrapbook, 29:56, Box 215, WMP. Mahone never fully lost the support of his former men. After Mahone caucused with Republicans in the Senate, one of his former soldiers wrote an editorial that criticized the Conservative Party in Virginia and said, “General Mahone has shown us a way out of the woods...we shall follow him and fear no danger.”; Samuel Keiningham to William Mahone, Oct 3, 1875, Box 2, UVA. While many veterans attributed the Confederate victory at the Crater to Mahone, many others stayed in contact with him in hopes of financial aid. Sam E. Keiningham, of Mahone's old Virginia brigade, pleaded with Mahone to assist him, writing, “oh general if you can, assist one who is afflicted during the war and the lord will surely repay you.” To former veterans, Mahone was always known to be generous with his finances, which is perhaps why he received so many requests for money.

35 Maddex, *The Virginia Conservatives*, xii. Maddex’s account is the most detailed study on Virginia’s politics during Reconstruction; On the meaning and label of “conservative” in the late nineteenth century
The United States was victorious in the spring of 1865 but questions of when and how to readmit the former Confederate states back into the Union remained unanswered. Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency following Abraham Lincoln’s assassination on April 14 (died on the 15) and his administration adopted a lenient stance toward the former Confederate states, offering pardons to thousands of rebels, and moving to return control of their states to them as soon as possible. These policies were viewed by Radical Republicans as a threat to the newly won freedom of black people that the Thirteenth Amendment guaranteed. If southern states were quickly allowed to govern themselves, they might curtail the freedoms of the former slaves and prevent them from voting. Additionally, the Radical Republicans saw a largely unrepentant South that might have accepted defeat, but not that their cause had been wrong and believed Reconstruction must be a slower process in order to restructure southern governments without input from former Confederate statesmen. Radical Republicans and President Johnson fought over the path Reconstruction should take with the president vetoing every measure passed by

see James Tice Moore, *Two Paths to the New South: The Virginia Debt Controversy, 1870-1883* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974); Adam Smith, *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics 1846-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). Political terminology in Virginia can be confusing. Between the end of the Civil War and 1883, the Conservative Party comprised most white Virginians. The term conservative, as used in our politics today, is not translatable to how it was used in Mahone’s era. Politicians in the North and South, Republican and Democrat, could refer to themselves as conservatives. Historian Adam Smith describes how calling yourself a conservative was a way to “legitimize” any number of political views or actions. And how the people who used this term “shifted under the pressure of events,” but that generally, calling yourself conservative denoted “a disposition, a way of signaling a measured, mature approach to the problems of the world.” However, by 1883 the Readjusters had linked the Conservative Party unfavorably to traditional and elitist elements in Virginia often called the “Bourbons” or “Funders.” The Readjusters strongly critiqued these men as being stuck in the antebellum past and refusing to compromise on issues like the state debt and black suffrage, thereby irrevocably harming the future of the state. These attacks led the Conservatives to begin calling themselves Democrats in 1883, around the same time the Readjuster coalition was falling apart. In this thesis, the use of “Conservative” will be used in reference to Virginia’s Conservative Party of which Mahone was a leading figure until the mid to late 1870s. Many Conservatives remained ardently against economic reform or readjustment of Virginia’s state debt, they also tended to be hardliners on the proper way to honor the defunct Confederacy and the Old South.
Congress. In response, the Radical Republicans passed the first of the Reconstruction Acts on March 2, 1867. These acts divided the former Confederate states into military districts and prevented them from returning to the Union until they ratified new constitutions that adopted the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which protected African American citizenship and voting rights respectively.

The process of Virginia ratifying a new constitution was drawn out and controversial. From December 3, 1867, through April 17, 1868, Virginia held a convention to ratify a new constitution that would draft what would come to be known as the Underwood Constitution. This convention was made up of twenty-four African American delegates and many Radical Republicans who determined, among other things, that men who had supported the Confederacy should be disenfranchised. It was clear that Congress would not budge on the requirement that states must adopt the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, but there were different opinions on the clause that disenfranchised many former Confederates. Even the United States general in charge of Virginia’s Reconstruction, John M. Schofield, disapproved of this measure (to say nothing of most white Virginians) and the ratification of the Underwood Constitution was delayed at his orders.

Having started his career as a railroad man, railroad expansion was the cornerstone of Mahone’s vision for a revitalized Virginia following the war and Virginia’s turbulent political landscape provided Mahone an excellent chance to lobby for political influence via his railroads. Railroads underwent a dramatic expansion on the east coast following the war as numerous smaller lines vied to be the eastern terminus for railroads that stretched into the western United States, and in Virginia, political parties became increasingly beholden to railroad interests. William Mahone knew he could use this connection to his advantage and quickly regained
control of the railroads he operated prior to the war. As Jack Maddex writes, “the influence of railroad companies pervaded the Virginia Conservatives’ politics,” and that, “Mahone’s railroad gave legislators passes [to ride] as long as they voted in its interests.” Mahone combined several prominent Virginia railroads into the Atlantic, Mississippi and Ohio company, which essentially created a monopoly over all railroads in Virginia and allowed him to exercise considerable political influence. Through the railroads, Mahone vaulted himself into prominence both financially and politically but Virginia's impoverished condition meant he needed investment from the North. Many northern Republicans shared his views on rebuilding the South's economy through industrialization, and their common goal made them eager to work with Mahone to readmit Virginia back into the Union.  

Mahone realized his railroads could not attract the northern capital they sorely required unless he could convince his fellow Virginia Conservatives to compromise with the Republican Party on the issue of drafting a new state constitution. Despite the Radical Republicans on one side, and some Virginia Conservatives who were fiercely opposed to economic deals with the North, Mahone and many white Virginians agreed with the Republicans on economic policies to rebuild the state. Despite their similar goals, Mahone never advocated for northerners to take control over his business interests and believed his railroads recognized a responsibility to the Old Dominion that no northern concern did. However, his railroads were in dire need of financial

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36 Maddex, *Virginia Conservatives*, 143, 145. Maddex argues that the political impact of railroads was felt before the war, but that it became of increasing importance in its aftermath as men like Mahone plotted to consolidate any smaller railroads they could, turning them into “interstate trunk lines.”; On Mahone’s railroad career see also Nelson, *Blake William Mahone of Virginia*, 76, 89. Mahone resumed his role as president of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad without opposition after the war and began plans for the Virginia-Lynchburg railroad. Mahone’s consolidation schemes saw him elected president of two additional railroads and paid a salary of $25,000 yearly which was the same as the president of the United States at the time; See also Mark Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 9-10.
assistance and he began to pressure politicians of both parties to seek out a compromise that would allow Virginia to write a new state constitution and be readmitted to the United States.\textsuperscript{37}

Mahone’s effective organization of the Readjuster Party in the 1880s was built upon his aggressive use of insiders in the state legislature in the preceding decade. These operatives pushed his railroad consolidation plans and waited day and night for orders from William Mahone. Railroads were an important issue for governments in nearly every state, as politicians and business executives competed for the most profitable routes. These trade routes were connected via the railroads, making who owned and operated them of crucial importance. Shortly after the war, Mahone’s supporters wrote to him about the issue of consolidation, describing Mahone’s “noble efforts to build up Virginia through her railways.” Mahone’s three primary lobbyists were R. F. Walker, a newspaper man with Mahone’s Whig who had contacts in Virginia’s government and acted as Mahone’s chief spy; John Slaughter, a railroad ally of Mahone’s from Lynchburg and future bank executive; and W. Statham, a tobacco dealer and banker also from Lynchburg. Walker in particular bombarded Mahone with correspondence. In letters to Mahone, he recounted that “The governor thinks you are the best railroad man in the U.S.,” and he asked Mahone to “command me day and night” to work on lobbying for Consolidation.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} Summers, \textit{Railroads, Reconstruction}, 11; Maddex, \textit{Virginia Conservatives}, 149.

\textsuperscript{38} Summers, \textit{Railroads, Reconstruction}, 63, 150; William Cabell Rives to William Mahone, Oct 24, 1867, box 7, UVA; Ibid., Richard F. Walker to William Mahone, April. 9, 1868, UVA; Ibid., July 17, 1868. On the power of Lobbyists in railroad legislation, Mark Summers argued that lobbyists wielded large influence over state committees that were “a proving ground for mediocre men, who by obtaining prominence there, might be allowed to exercise their limited talents in more respectable positions.” He argues that corruption was essential for any bill to pass and railroad lobbyists were experts at doing the right favor for the right legislator; For background information on Mahone’s lobbyists see Maddex, \textit{Virginia Conservatives}, 48, 70, 151; Moore, \textit{Two Paths to the New South}, 150-151.
Railroads appealed not only to politicians but to individual towns and communities as well, and this made investing in railroads and their owners attractive for all politicians. Every class of society had something to gain from the railroads in this era of the New South via commerce and jobs, but railroads represented more than this. They embodied a spirit of possibility and revival in a war-ravaged Virginia and politicians were in constant conflict to make sure their locality benefited from them. The success of one railroad over another could destroy the economic prospects of a town or county while driving untold wealth and commerce through another, and this engendered intensive sectional rivalries that local politicians had to cater to. The high stakes involved in these operations opened the door for considerable corruption and Mark Summers wrote that “such haggling and political corruption was typical of all efforts to foster internal improvement.” Therefore, William Mahone relied on men like Walker to accomplish his goals and Mahone remained committed to running an organization filled with insider loyalists throughout his career in politics.39

39 Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction*, 9, 35; For a view that contradicts Summers’s opinion on the importance of railroads to the politics of ordinary Virginians see Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia 1856-70* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 186. Lowe argues that Railroads and business interests were of importance to men like Mahone, but they were “not foremost in the minds of most Virginians during this period.” In my opinion Mark Summer’s interpretation is more convincing because it demonstrates how economic concerns, like the railroads, were an integral part of both the Conservative and Republican parties during this period and fighting railroad profits directly impacted Reconstruction policies, like Virginia’s new state constitution, in important ways even if race and the status of former Confederates were slightly more divisive issues, as Lowe argued.
Virginia Readmitted: Mahone’s Organization of the Committee of Nine

Mahone’s economic philosophy placed him in a growing group of “New Movement” Conservatives who wished to facilitate Virginia’s reentry into the United States as quickly as possible to support business opportunities for the state. To accomplish this Mahone likely politicked for two of his friends to be placed on the “Committee of Nine.” In January 1869, this group negotiated with President Grant for the separation of the provision in the Underwood Constitution that disenfranchised Confederate veterans from a vote on the constitution itself. The committee had swayed President Grant and now Mahone and several conservative Republicans met in Petersburg and proposed a moderate Republican, Gilbert C. Walker, for governor of Virginia. Gilbert Walker was a native New Yorker who currently lived in Norfolk and directed Mahone’s railroads there. A moderate Republican who favored Mahone’s business and industrial policies, and essentially worked for him, Walker was Mahone’s ideal candidate to calmly lead Virginia back into the United States, and most New Movement Conservatives and compromise minded Republicans supported him.⁴⁰

Mahone was central to the success of these events however, not all Conservatives believed Virginia should negotiate with the Republicans on a new constitution and they wanted to wait out Grant’s ultimate decision, even if it risked Radical Republican rule. Before Jubal Early attacked Mahone’s characterization of him in his memoir he led this vocal minority of Conservatives who opposed the New Movement’s plan. These men argued that any negotiation was a slight on Virginia’s honor, but they did not provide an alternative course and most Conservatives got behind the Walker ticket, though many never agreed on the provision for black suffrage and office holding. That the Walker compromise came to fruition in Virginia

⁴⁰ The best discussion of all these events is Maddex, Virginia Conservatives, 72-75.
demonstrated the fluidity of political ideology among white Virginians after the war. Conservatives like Early, who acted out of honor for the state, were a minority compared to industrial minded opportunists like Mahone. For many, loyalty to the state and older traditions was not worth the financial cost.\footnote{Maddex, \textit{Virginia Conservatives}, 28, 70, 77; Blake, \textit{William Mahone of Virginia}, 102; Summers, \textit{Railroads, Reconstruction}, 67,74; Eric Foner, \textit{Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution}, 1863-1877 (1988; New York: Harperperennial, 2014), 413. These works argued in favor of Mahone having a major impact on the formation and effectiveness of the Committee of Nine and the overall Walker compromise. Mahone’s biographer Nelson Blake also argued for Mahone’s growing influence with both Virginia’s conservatives and the more “liberal” Republican faction that men like Walker identified with. Mahone supported Walker, and a compromise with the Republicans, because he believed Walker would back his railroad consolidation plans once in office. For a competing interpretation see Lowe, \textit{Republicans and Reconstruction}, 171, 174. Lowe argues that the Walker compromise was inevitable and that Mahone had a somewhat inconsequential part in these proceedings. It is true that Mahone was not the only figure responsible for the committee of nine, but the resulting Walker ticket and its success owe largely to his support. Additionally, two Committee of Nine members, J.F. Slaughter and William Owen, were current supporters of Mahone’s consolidation plans. Lowe even concedes that “No man, other than the candidate himself, worked harder for Walker’s success.”}

When Grant accepted the Committee of Nine’s proposal to hold a separate vote on disenfranchising Confederates from the gubernatorial ticket, Conservatives realized they had to back the compromise ticket of Gilbert C. Walker or risk losing Virginia to the Radical Republican candidate Wells and his African American supporters. Following Conservatives’ acceptance of this ticket, Mahone supported Gilbert C. Walker's bid for governor through any means necessary, and this alerted him, possibly for the first time, to the significance of controlling the black vote in Virginia. On May 12, 1869 an A. H. Ashburn wrote to Mahone about African Americans working for Walker's opponent and requested Mahone find a black speaker to stump for candidate Walker. Another of Mahone’s railroad allies, Robert Owen, wrote in plain terms to the general about the prospects of controlling the negro vote in favor of Governor Walker writing, “they can to a great extent be controlled by the same motives and influences that control the whites…but this will be a work of time.” We can surmise from these
letters that Mahone saw black people in Virginia as means to an end as early as 1869. If Conservatives could convince black Virginians that they were their friends, and not the Republicans, they could tap into this large voting bloc of black men in Virginia that had been resolutely Republican since the end of the war.\(^{42}\)

The Conservative Party’s efforts to split or control the black vote to aid their election of Walker were unsuccessful, with the African Americans resoundingly voting for the Radical candidate Wells. However, the Conservative unity orchestrated by William Mahone ensured the white majority would elect Gilbert Walker and he won in a landslide of 119,535 votes to 101,204. Most importantly for white Virginians, the laws restricting Confederate voting were soundly defeated and the state would shortly pass a new constitution that ratified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Walker assumed the office of governor in 1869 on what he called a “liberal Republican platform” and this was a significant victory for William Mahone as his major goal was Walker’s support of his railroad consolidation scheme. However, the unity of the African Americans voting for the Republicans was likely not lost on Mahone, or any other Conservatives in Virginia. This was yet more evidence that the Conservatives had little appeal to black voters in Virginia compared to the Republicans.\(^{43}\)

The Conservatives’ positive reactions to Gilbert Walker’s election dramatically increased Mahone’s popularity. With Walker’s election, white Virginians avoided the feared Radical Republican control of their state, which was unique among the other former Confederate states in

\(^{42}\) A.H. Ashburn to William Mahone, May 12, 1869, box 8, UVA; Ibid., Robert Owen to William Mahone May 30, 1869.

\(^{43}\) Vote total is from Maddex, *Virginia Conservatives*, 80-83; Richard Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction*, 176, 177. Lowe said that the vote went down along racial lines as “Walker won in the white areas of Virginia and Wells in the black.”
this respect. Mahone was viewed as a hero by white Virginians for his role in voting down the disenfranchising clauses directed at ex-Confederates, giving him substantial power and influence over state politics. A friend and supporter wrote exultantly to Mahone proclaiming, “All hail to the chief!...Virginia’s salvation is consolidation, and you are consolidation,” and former governor Francis H. Pierpont expressed his gratification toward Mahone when he stated that, “Virginia’s future depended on Walker’s election.” All of the praise directed at Mahone was motivated by ex-Confederates’ goal of restoring white, Conservative government in Virginia, and this could only be achieved if Confederate veterans were allowed to vote and hold office. The most personal praise for Mahone’s involvement in the process came from another supporter on July 22 who wrote, “He [Governor Walker] as well as the whole country owe you a debt of gratitude. For to you more than any other; are we indebted for the removal of our political chains with which we have been bound for many years.”

Buoyed by his success, Mahone immediately pressed Governor Walker for consolidation. In the process, however, he began to clash with rival northern railroad interests that would sow the seeds for his downfall in a few short years. The immediate result of Gilbert Walker’s election was the furtherance of Mahone's consolidation scheme; as one of his lieutenants reported, “our friend Walker is driving your railroad business like a crack…your schemes are sensible, seeking

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44 Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 413, 592. Additionally, because Walker was a moderate Republican, Foner argues: “In a sense, Virginia…experienced its Reconstruction during the four years of Readjuster rule.” His basis for this is the Readjusters’ pro-industry policies and extension of funding for the public schooling of both white and black children. With conservatives controlling Virginia for most of the 1870s, following the end of Walker’s term, these issues appear to have received less attention, (traditional Conservatives favored repayment of the state’s debt before funding for public schools) with only railroads receiving extensive funding from the government. This suited Mahone's interests and one can only speculate whether he would have sided with a Radical Republican regime in the early 1870s if the Walker compromise fell through in order to acquire support for his railroads.

45 Francis H. Pierpont to William Mahone, July 10, 1869, box 8, UVA; Ibid., (?) to William Mahone, July 22, 1869.
for the welfare of this downtrodden state, the cause is a good one and will in the end prevail.”

When Mahone came up against John S. Barbour of a rival railroad, who was also a future Democratic antagonist, even Mahone’s staunchest supporters urged him to compromise. While the author of one letter to Mahone in early 1870 stated, “I am your friend for two reasons, first because of your war record…and whatever you do I will still be your friend,” the author proceeded to wonder whether Mahone and Barbour should not “harmonize instead of antagonize?” Mahone's closest council routinely urged him that both his interests and the Barbour's interests were formidable and for this reason, Mahone should seek a compromise on the issue of consolidation. His decision not to increased hostility toward him from rival railroads and worried some Virginia Conservatives about his motivations and loyalty. 46

Mahone’s political star was perhaps never brighter than in the summer of 1871, and he affirmed his staunch commitment to the Conservatives in a letter to his favorite insider R. F. Walker. “It interest, and should always expect to have, in the success of the Conservative Party,” Mahone stated, “and do not mean to shrink from any responsibility which it [?] right for me to undertake. And to perform in the furtherance of its principles.” He further elaborated in a different letter that his support for Governor Gilbert Walker had been part of a long strategy to weaken the Republicans and that the Conservatives “need to acquire sufficient strength from that party [the Republicans] combined (with) the Democratic Party, will destroy radical supremacy.” With this statement Mahone seemed committed to the Conservative Party in Virginia, and he

46 Ibid., (?) to William Mahone, Sept 27, 1869; Ibid., (?) to William Mahone, Feb 8, 1870.
argued that the Conservatives needed to make alliances with black men and moderate Republicans in Virginia to undermine Radical Republican control of the state.\textsuperscript{47}

Despite all this political maneuvering, Mahone’s focus remained defending his railroads from the unregulated winner-take-all system that typified all railroads during this period. While Gilbert Walker had initially been in Mahone’s favor, he started to voice support for rival northern railroads and Mahone believed he needed to be replaced. Some of Mahone’s Conservative friends thought Mahone himself was the man for the job with one telling Mahone that he was “practically at sea” after Mahone declined to run. However, Mahone still preferred to remain an influencer behind the scenes as politics only mattered to him as far as it benefited his railroads. Mahone’s reticence to run for Governor was also a practical choice. For all his supporters there is no evidence that Mahone had enough support to run for governor in 1873.

Another reason Mahone chose not to run for governor in 1873 was that his railroad business was slowly falling apart due to the national financial panic of that year and he was desperately trying to salvage what he could of his consolidated Atlantic, Mississippi, and Ohio railroad. He spent most of his time traveling to meet with bondholders, including to England, and still believed he could salvage his business.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} William Mahone to Richard F. Walker, July 29, 1871, vol. 18, pp. 249, WMP; William Mahone to (?) November 13, 1871 pp. 316.
\textsuperscript{48} Summers, \textit{Railroads, Reconstruction}, 16-17; Maddex, \textit{Virginia Conservatives}, 154-155; (?) to William Mahone, Oct 11, 1872, Box 9, UVA. Mark Summers describes how this landscape led to a growing concern among northern and European creditors. “So notorious was the history of Southern railroads that their ill fame may have had national consequences” and as investors pulled their money out of rail lines that were defaulting on payment an economic panic quickly developed. Mahone made a desperate journey to Europe to try and appease his creditors, but it was no use and he was eventually forced to cede control of his entire enterprise to northern railroad interests, who had been looking for a way to undermine his success in Virginia for several years. This competitive atmosphere drove Mahone out of the railroad business with northern railroads buying up lines across the South, as Maddex argues, “during the 1870s railroad rivalries grew so fiercely competitive as to eliminate one contestant, General Mahone, entirely. No single interest won all that it desired, but an increase of Northern control was the general result.”
Mahone supported former Confederate James Lawson Kemper for Governor in 1873 to try and save his railroads. Mahone backed Kemper once he revealed himself to be a friend of Mahone’s consolidated Atlantic, Mississippi, and Ohio railroad and Mahone’s support again proved decisive as Kemper won the election. Kemper was a self-styled New Movement Conservative himself who favored cooperation with northern states in both business and politics. Traditionalist Conservatives like Jubal Early warned Kemper about relying on Mahone’s support, but Kemper and Mahone united over railroad policy much to Early’s chagrin.49 Mahone wielded substantial power behind the scenes and his friend who had expressed disappointment that he personally did not run for governor told him to “unite your friends [Kemper] and the work is done.” Upon assuming office Kemper worked in “close co-operation with General Mahone in policies and patronage,” further underscoring Mahone's influence by this point. Kemper's cooperation with Mahone demonstrated how the economic policy Mahone had advocated for during this period had real pull among a wide variety of white Virginians that had little to do with loyalty to an antebellum past.50 However, Mahone's successful support of Gilbert Walker and James Kemper agitated many Conservatives who believed he was controlling Kemper from behind the scenes and Kemper refused to support Mahone’s own bid for governor in 1877 and broke all contact with him. Mahone believed he could win back his railroads if he

50 (?) to William Mahone, Oct 11, 1872, Box 9, UVA; Maddex, *Virginia Conservatives*, 108, 110, 112. Maddex described this trend by referencing Kemper’s first statements as governor. “He committed himself to equal civil rights, sectional Reconciliation, encouragement of education and economic development… He presented himself as a thoroughly reconstructed southerner.”; The race issue remained of crucial importance for most white Virginians who backed Kemper. One man wrote that “it would be better to elect Grant the 30th or 70th time than to have the state come under the control of Hughes and the negroes.” A. Falkerson to William Mahone, July 3, 1874, box 11, UVA.
was governor and the Conservatives failure to support his bid must have convinced him that he had few friends left in that party despite his service to their interests throughout the 1870s.

Mahone, the formidable political organizer, yielded to Frederick Holliday in the gubernatorial nomination in 1877, but Governor Holliday would soon run the Conservative party aground over the lingering financial issue of Virginia’s wartime debt that neither Governor Walker nor Kemper had resolved successfully. After years of lobbying politicians as a railroad magnate, Mahone’s railroads were collapsing into bankruptcy after the financial crisis of 1873 and he looked toward new opportunities in the fragmented Conservative ranks to stabilize himself. His status as a railroad magnate, Confederate war hero, and political influencer drew many people to him who were loyal beyond question and many others who desperately sought to benefit from Mahone’s substantial business and political connections. However, Mahone was never truly a Conservative at all and had no qualms about breaking up that party on the issue of Virginia’s war debt in 1879 and leading a third-party coalition, the Readjusters to power in Virginia. The Readjusters relied on black voters in Virginia for their success and Mahone’s political experience during the 1870s and cultivation of the crucial black vote allowed him to lead the most successful third-party movement in southern politics during Reconstruction.51

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51 Mahone’s one true passion in life was almost certainly his railroads. After they were finally divided up into other lines by 1881 Mahone issued a statement to his former stockholders which read “the development of this line of railroad has been my life’s most earnest work, I grew up with it and it with me. It was the pride and sole object of the best days of my life.” “President Mahone’s Statement to the Stockholders,” Norfolk Virginian reprinted in the Bristol News, March 1, 1881, Scrapbook 41, Box 221, WMP. (All Scrapbooks are from the WMP.)
Chapter II: Virginia Radical, William Mahone the Readjuster and Republican

Figure 3: Mahone shortly before his appointment to the United States Senate as a Readjuster 1879-1880 (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-DIG-cwpbh-04844).

Following his unsuccessful attempt to secure the Conservative Party’s nomination for governor in 1877, William Mahone emerged as the leader of a political coalition of white and black Virginians who favored a reduction or complete repudiation of Virginia's wartime debt; Mahone organized this coalition into the Readjuster Party. I argue that Mahone was an instrumental reformer of Virginia’s economy and political system and, even if his acceptance of black suffrage had clearly defined limits, Mahone and the Readjuster Party made a legitimate attempt to form a new political center in Virginia based on the Republicans’ Reconstruction policy of universal male suffrage and free and fair elections. Mahone’s pragmatic leadership of this Party was essential to its success and this has been obscured by his political enemies’ attribution of all of the Readjusters’ failings to Mahone’s overbearing leadership. The
Readjusters’ reforms were successful, if only briefly, and they were defeated by the Democratic Party’s appeals to white supremacy with Mahone’s leadership a contributing but not decisive factor. My interpretation of William Mahone’s career as a Readjuster is a fusion of past scholarship that has portrayed Mahone as either a highly principled reformer, or a pragmatist who gave little thought to anything outside of his own self-interest. These personality traits were not mutually exclusive and both were fundamental to Mahone’s successes as a politician. This chapter is divided into several thematic sections: the “liberalism” of the Readjusters, Mahone’s status as the quintessential reconstructed rebel, the results and reactions to the extensive federal patronage Mahone controlled as a Senator, and the white supremacist violence that ultimately defeated the movement. These sections analyze Mahone’s motivations and those of the party in the context of what they accomplished, and what these accomplishments meant for both white and black Virginians. William Mahone accepted a postwar society in Virginia that fundamentally challenged the state’s white elites, and this made the Readjuster Party’s brief success even more remarkable.

Maddex 249-255. Maddex portrayed Mahone as an opportunistic and effective political actor. For scholarship that supports this interpretation but focuses more on Mahone’s principles and the successes of his policies in the realm of black suffrage and public education see Moore, Two Paths to the New South; Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet; Dailey, Before Jim Crow, 39. These interpretations, especially Dailey’s stress Mahone’s “principles over his opportunism” and emphasizes his belief that the South's future depended on entrepreneurship, technology, and an investment in mining, manufacturing and the labor force in Virginia's cities as a way forward for the Old Dominion. For an excellent analysis of the broader issues of Reconstruction and how the Readjuster attitudes on race aligned with the Republicans see Foner, Reconstruction, 231. Even the great Radical leader Thaddeus Stephens remained reticent on what black suffrage would mean for social equality. In a speech in the House Stephens stated that “Negro equality…does not mean that a negro shall sit on the same seat or eat at the same table with a white man, that is a matter of taste which every man must decide for himself.” See also Blair, Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914; Brent Tarter, The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).
Political allegiances shifted rapidly in Virginia following the Civil War as white and black people formed alliances based on class, locality, race, and ideology. In this turbulent atmosphere, party affiliation was less a determiner of who someone would vote for than we view it as today. This factionalism gave Mahone and white Conservatives leeway to form the Readjuster Party out of the Conservatives and Republicans. Adding to the confusion, opposing factions often used the terms liberal and conservative to describe their policies. For William Mahone, the Readjusters’ policies were liberal because they encouraged northern investment and promoted universal male suffrage in contrast to the Conservative elites of the state. This terminology is limited by our modern standards, but it is important to analyze the Readjusters with the terms they used to aid in conceptualizing the movement’s accomplishments as well as its limitations. Theirs was liberalism very much in line with Republican ideology during Reconstruction; revitalizing the South through industry and allowing African Americans to participate in Democracy as guaranteed by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. On the other hand, the Virginia Conservative Party, which was also known as the Bourbons and Funders, realized Mahone had effectively turned the label of conservative against them by associating it with economic stagnation and aversion to progress. To remedy this the Conservatives renamed themselves as the Democratic Party in 1883 in solidarity with the rest of the white South and described their own economic policies as liberal in an effort to undercut Mahone.53

53 For scholarship that focuses on the factionalism or sectionalism of Reconstruction era political parties see Nicolas Barreye, Gold and Freedom: The Political Economy of Reconstruction (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2015); Michael F. Holt, By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008); The label “Bourbons” referred to the ruling house in France who had been restored to power but had allegedly learned nothing after said restoration. Degler, The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 271.
Mahone’s rhetoric on liberalism was important because it built a firm foundation for the Readjusters by convincing black people and Republicans that the party would protect their interests, and by persuading agrarian whites that the Conservatives represented a Virginia run by and for the white elite at the expense of everyone else. For Mahone and his supporters, being socially liberal did not clash with their view that their African American supporters should occupy a lower status in the Readjuster movement and Readjusters’ policies did not create a drastic restructuring of race relations in Virginia, as Mahone’s enemies routinely claimed they did. Nevertheless, his letters are full of idealistic references to universal manhood suffrage and an industrialized, modern society that the Readjuster Party was working toward. This liberal rhetoric of the Readjusters legitimized African American suffrage in a way not seen in the rest of the former Confederacy.54

Rhetoric about liberalism complimented Mahone’s ability to mix idealism with practical benefits to his supporters in the form of state and federal patronage. As a United States Senator Mahone distributed over 2,000 federal appointments and he “cooperated with black party leaders to find African American laborers to fill positions in the Norfolk Navy Yard and Washington D.C.” Using this strategy, the Readjuster coalition promoted debt reduction, suffrage for all men, free schools, and fair taxes, and they abolished literacy tests and other restrictions on the suffrage of African Americans and poor whites in Virginia. The party’s potential was realized quickly. In 1879, the Readjusters won control of the state government until 1884 and elected seven men to

54 Moore, Two Paths to the New South, 86; Dailey, Before Jim Crow, 2. Moore summarized the Readjusters’ vision from 1881 on as “a glowing dream of the future...a Virginia with the opportunity for the able, democracy for the masses, and public education for all. New-comers-immigrants and investors alike-would be welcomed without regard to their religious or political beliefs. Farmers and townsmen would share in the profits of industrial growth. The races would also coexist in harmony, socially segregated but united by common political rights and economic needs.”
the United States House of representatives, two to the Senate (including Mahone where he
served until 1887) and Readjuster William Evelyn Cameron served as Virginia’s governor from
1882-1886.\textsuperscript{55}

Mahone’s balancing act as party leader proved insufficient to quiet his opponents’
accusations that he favored a Virginia controlled by black people and Republicans. The
Readjuster Party ultimately collapsed once the debt issue was resolved and white Virginians
reacted with violence and hostility to black Readjusters’ increasing demands for better jobs and
leadership positions within the party. William Mahone resisted appointing black men to the
highest levels of the party, but it is important to note that white Republicans in Virginia had
resisted this as well and the collapse of the Readjuster Party is best understood in the framework
of a national Republican retreat from defending black rights in the South. The murder of
unarmed black men in Danville in 1883 was another occurrence of the violence against black
people throughout the South during Reconstruction and it severely weakened the Readjusters,
who were defeated by the Democrats in the election that November. Black people voted the
Readjuster ticket in 1883, even after the murders, but the violence irreparably shattered
Mahone’s white coalition who feared violent reprisals for supporting Mahone and who had no
concern for black rights.\textsuperscript{56}

Virginia's inability to settle its exorbitant wartime debt magnified the class divisions
within the Conservative Party and opened the door for Mahone to organize the Readjusters along

\textsuperscript{55} Moore, \textit{Two Paths to the New South}, 45-47, 66, 79.

\textsuperscript{56} Moore, \textit{Two Paths to the New South}, 100, 151. Moore’s conclusions on why the movement broke apart
are sound, and my thesis builds on many of them. His reasons include the antagonistic factions that made
up the party that, for all their cooperation, could not transcend racial divisions in the South. Democrats
organized to defend white supremacy in the face of the benefits the Readjusters provided for black
Virginians.
economic fault lines. Poor whites clamored for debt readjustment and this demonstrated that these white Virginians would adopt new party loyalties if their livelihoods were threatened. Prior to the Civil War, Virginia had accrued a large amount of debt to fund numerous internal improvements, primarily railroads. The immense destruction wrought by the war on these vital arteries left Virginia in a perilous financial position. A series of Conservative governors remained committed to repaying Virginia’s debt in full and their supporters were colloquially called Funders because of their view on Virginia’s debt. The Funders were unwilling to make drastic concessions to tackle the debt issue and, with the economic recession of 1873 and other financial difficulties, a movement within the Conservative ranks to pay less of the state debt or absolve it entirely, gained traction. Proponents of this movement were called readjusters for their plan to downwardly readjust the debt and use the surplus capital to fund Virginia's infrastructure and social institutions, such as the public-school system. Their plans appealed to working-class whites and black Virginians, who felt robbed by the exorbitant state debt and did not feel obligated to pay it all off.

Mahone entered the debate over Virginia’s debt because his business and political future depended on it. When his railroads collapsed in the mid-1870s, and his bid for governor in 1877 was blocked by his Conservative rivals, Mahone realized he had no future in the Conservative ranks and aggressively took on the cause of the readjustment of Virginia’s debt which had long threatened to break up the Conservative Party due to the mismanagement of governor Kemper. Previously, Mahone had supported the full funding of the debt and many of his own railroad employees had little love for his economic policy. Mahone had made intractable enemies in the

Moore, *Two Paths*, 3, 15. Moore described how Virginia’s debt spiraled out of control in the postwar years, reaching a height of $45 million dollars in 1870. This left each Virginian with a “per capita debt burden more than twice the national average,” and Virginia teetered on bankruptcy.
Conservative ranks due to his railroad and political scheming. This scheming, combined with his political machinations behind the scenes, caused many Conservatives not to trust him. In this atmosphere, Mahone realized the issue of readjusting the state's debt had divided his Conservative rivals and might give him a new political future.\textsuperscript{58}

Mahone Revisits His Wartime Service to Acquire Legitimacy

As Mahone stepped into the foreground of Virginia’s politics he decided to write about his military service again, for the first time since the controversy over his memoir with Jubal Early in 1871, in order to build some legitimacy for himself among white Virginians. Poor agrarian whites especially would likely have little inclination to support a former railroad tycoon after the economic disasters of the 1870s. To combat any negative perceptions of his business career among these white men, Mahone reframed his military service around his interactions with Robert E. Lee to play to the popular Lost Cause narrative of the day. Mahone focused his writings in the period on his closeness with Lee at the war’s end in several letters to his friends, including General Longstreet. Through Longstreet and others Mahone sought confirmation of his role as Lee’s close confidant and he likely believed this was necessary to cut off his detractors such as Early, Weisiger, and James Lane. These men viewed Mahone’s sudden advocacy for debt repudiation, and eventual allegiance to the Republicans, as the same type of betrayal as

\textsuperscript{58} Maddex, \textit{Virginia Conservatives}, 245, 250-253. Both the administrations of Gilbert Walker and James Kemper had tried and failed to address the debt issue. Traditional Conservatives believed in paying all the debt to uphold Virginia’s honor, and this was the policy Kemper pursued. However, after the financial panic of 1873 Kemper’s determination to pay off the entire debt threatened financial collapse across the state, especially among the farmers. With the policy of funding the debt backfiring on traditional Conservatives, Mahone seized his chance to align himself with those Conservatives who favored readjustment of the debt, as Maddex writes, “the general had experienced the same financial stringency that had brought the farmers to question the debt, and he, too had suffered at the hands of foreign bondholders,” and that, “Mahone…was losing his railroad power and had now become a pariah to most of the Conservative leadership.” In this situation, Mahone viewed tying his career to the growing opposition to paying off Virginia’s debt as the only sensible course left to him.
general Longstreet’s allegiance to President Grant and the Republicans in 1868, and they redoubled their attacks against him.

Mahone highlighted conversations he had had with Lee during the Appomattox campaign to show how frequently Lee relied on him in the final days of the war. On the eve of Lee’s April ninth surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, General Lee called Mahone and Longstreet to him to seek their advice. Following the war, likely in 1879, when Mahone wrote several letters about this moment, he wrote to Longstreet to corroborate his version of the event. Mahone stated that upon his arrival in camp Lee said to him “you know general that I always send for you when I am in trouble.” Mahone said he advised surrender to General Lee, after he advised him that it was his personal preference to fight to the bitter end, and that Lee reluctantly agreed with him. To Longstreet Mahone wrote “you and I as the only living witnesses to that interview might agree upon a statement of it if you please.” Longstreet was a close friend of Mahone and offered no contradictory version of these final days. With Longstreet’s support Mahone likely felt confident in discussing the war again, since nearly a decade had passed since his feud with Early, and he needed to inspire support among Confederate veterans if he was to have political success. Despite Longstreet being reviled by Lost Causers like Early, if Longstreet could corroborate Mahone’s discussions with General Lee, Mahone was willing to seek his support. Additionally, Longstreet himself was regularly arguing against his portrayal by Early and others and his role as historical scapegoat for Confederate defeat was not as clear cut then as it has been made since.59

While he organized the Readjusters in 1879, William Mahone argued that Robert E. Lee had believed working together with the northern states was beneficial and not a betrayal of the

59 William Mahone to James Longstreet “The Interview,” Folder 3, Box 1, LV; The best book on James Longstreet’s reputation is William Garret Piston’s, Lee’s Tarnished Lieutenant: James Longstreet and his Place in Southern History (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987).
South. Mahone described his mindset in a letter that referred back to his meeting with Lee prior to the surrender at Appomattox, which stated that “the war ended as I took it to be, then and there…and as I am sure Genl Lee considered, my desire was and my every effort from that time has been to repair the waste at home and to heal the wounds of war.” Lee died in 1870 and did not publish memoirs, but he did express his desire to rebuild Virginia and accept the war’s outcome (at least publicly). Lee told one of his friends that “Virginia and every other state in the South needs us. We must try, and with as little delay as possible, go to work to build up their prosperity,” and to a Confederate widow, he wrote: “Madam, don't bring up your sons to detest the United States Government. Recollect that we form but one country, now. Abandon all these local animosities and make your sons Americans.”

Therefore, when men like Jubal Early railed over Mahone’s alleged apostasy from the Conservative ranks, Mahone claimed he was simply working to rebuild Virginia as Lee had wanted and that the Conservatives no longer suited these ideals. From Mahone’s perspective, his close association with Lee at Appomattox restored the legitimacy that he had squandered in the memoir dispute with Early. As a Readjuster, Mahone stated that he moved forward with no sectional bitterness in an honest effort to rebuild Virginia and this won him substantial support among Republicans.

**Mahone Breaks from the Conservative Party**

With a strong legacy of Confederate service and political success, Mahone emerged as the clear leader for readjusting Virginia’s debt as soon as he decided to speak on the issue. He organized the Conservative supporters of debt readjustment into the Readjuster Party at a meeting with white and black people in 1879 at Mozart Hall in Richmond Virginia. There were

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60 William Mahone to Edwin R. Robbins, May 9, 1879, vol 31, 15, WMP; See also “Mahone, Virginia,” Richmond Whig, Scrapbook 19:77, Box 212; Freeman, Lee, 515; Edward Childe, The Life and Campaigns of General Lee, trans. George Litting (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1875), 331.
only fourteen black Republican delegates out of the 200 assembled, but they pleaded for racial unity and were apparently well received by Mahone’s white supporters. This was the new coalition that enjoyed a quick victory in 1879 when they won both the Virginia House and Senate. Despite the inclusion of African Americans in the movement in 1879, the Readjusters’ leadership came from the ranks of the Conservative Party, especially “original” Conservative Readjusters, such as prominent orator “Parson” John Massey. Conservatives such as Massey supported readjustment solely to aid the poor white farmer and were not concerned with appealing to African Americans in Virginia, or lowering taxes and funding public schools, which would become central planks in the Readjuster platform. This version of the Readjusters had achieved success, but Mahone knew he needed to attract more Republican voters and financial supporters to continue to fight the Conservative Party. To this end, Mahone’s adopted an increasingly liberal stance on black suffrage and laid out reform plans for taxes and public schools. This change in platform united dissident Conservatives, and black Republicans as Readjusters on a broader base of issues and won the support of the northern Republican Party.61

By 1881, The Readjusters’ rhetoric on black suffrage resembled the Radical Republicans. The Party won further electoral victories in that year and Mahone took his seat in the United States Senate on March fourth. Senator Mahone recognized how crucial the black vote had been for Republican success in Virginia at the local level in the years before the compromise election of Gilbert C. Walker, and under his leadership the Readjusters’ policy evolved from one of

61 Carl N. Degler, *The Other South*, 276-277. In the election of 1879, the Readjusters won fifty-six seats out of a hundred in the lower house and twenty-four out of forty in the upper. Eleven black men were elected to the former and two to the latter; The most comprehensive breakdown of black and white voters by county in Virginia from 1879-1883 is Moore, *Two Paths to the New South*, 82, 125-130. Parson John Massey had been the leading Conservative in favor of readjusting Virginia’s debt in the 1870s. He argued that the war had so impoverished Virginia that the state had no means of paying the exorbitant debt and that both local and northern bondholders must swallow the loss.
indifference toward black voters into the liberal language of the Radicals by 1881. Mahone reframed the party’s goals as a fight for opportunity and equality in politics for both races. Black males in Virginia made up over forty percent of the electorate and constituted a large segment of Readjuster supporters, and Mahone brought agrarian whites in to complete his coalition. These men had been drawn into the movement by Massey's rhetoric on readjusting the debt, but it remained to be seen if they would truly support a third party once the debt issue was settled. This alliance between prominent white men, black people, and poor whites made the Readjusters the most successful challengers to Democratic hegemony in the South.

Mahone seized control of the Readjusters through political opportunism, but if he was not an “original Readjuster” he was certainly the man responsible for breaking the movement away from the Conservatives and realigning its policies to benefit black people in Virginia. However, in taking control of the movement from men like Massey he exacerbated the already growing resentment many Conservatives had for him and threatened the delicate relationship the Readjusters had with white Virginians in general. Massey's biographer described John Massey as a “Conservative on all matters except fiscal,” and stated he believed that “white supremacy must be maintained.” Thus, many Conservatives, like Massey, would only remain loyal to Mahone insofar as they could advance their own careers by supporting the Readjusters. This led to the instability of the movement as Mahone showed no intention to return to the Conservative Party after 1879 and demonstrated a willingness to advocate for black interests and fair elections at the expense of Conservative supporters. Once Mahone backed a former captain in his old Virginia brigade, William Evelyn Cameron, for governor instead of Massey in 1882, the Parson became an ardent critic of Mahone and expressed severe bitterness long after the fact when he stated that Mahone, “finding he could not use me for his personal ends had no further use for me.” Massey
returned to the Conservative Party and made an unsuccessful bid for Congress against Readjuster
John Sergeant Wise in 1882, but he effectively took three majority white Readjuster counties out
of the Party when he broke from Mahone in 1882.62

62 Richard, Doss, ““Parson” John E. Massey, Relentless Readjuster,” Albemarle County Historical Society
Hancock (New York: Neale Publishing Co, 1909), 193-199; Brief biographical information on William
Cameron can be found in Moore, Two Paths to the New South, 141; See also John Massey to William
Mahone, April 1881, box 13, UVA; William Mahone to John Massey, Oct 1882, vol 33, p. 12-15, 41-43,
WMP. Prior to the nomination, Massey wrote Mahone a letter seeking assurance he would be nominated
instead of Cameron: “I know, moreover, you would never consent that one who has proven himself as
faithful a friend as I have should suffer at your hands.” In a letter shortly before this Mahone kept Massey
in the dark and said that gubernatorial nominations “must be left to the party.” Parson Massey died in
1901, but not before participating in the constitutional convention of that year which would ultimately
pass a new state constitution that disenfranchised black people through numerous methods; For the
election results between John Sergeant Wise and Parson John Massey see Warrock-Richardson Almanack
(Richmond Va., 1882), 59.
Readjuster Reconstruction in Virginia: A Political Realignment

Figure 4: “2 Years of Readjuster Rule. 14 Years of Funder Rule.” Mahone and the Readjusters’ styled themselves as liberals because they argued that their goal of lowering Virginia’s debt would free up money and capital to be used on modernizing Virginia and returning the state to a leadership role in the country. As opposed to the Conservative Party (or Funders) who were committed to paying back Virginia’s debt, and risked bankrupting the state to do it. Here Mahone’s paper the Richmond Whig published a broadside that depicts Mahone as opening the door to a new era of prosperity for the commonwealth. (The Richmond Whig, 1881, Scrapbooks, Box 213, WMP.)

Advocating a platform of universal manhood suffrage, and full economic reform of the South through railroads and industry, William Mahone and the Readjusters gave hope to a Republican Party in full retreat from Reconstruction across the South by the 1880s. Mahone's advocacy for railroads and industry to rebuild the South mirrored the Republican Party’s “Gospel of Prosperity” ideology from the 1870s, and he seemed to have survived the backlash against advocates for railroads and big business that had followed the financial panic of 1873. In
Virginia, Radical Republicans occupied just fourteen seats in the General Assembly in 1878, falling from fifty-six in 1870. This Republican collapse in Virginia was typical in other former Confederate states and it left them ill-suited to continue their advocacy for black suffrage. As the power of southern Republicans waned, they looked to Mahone as the quintessential example of an influential southerner that they could convert to their cause, a hope buoyed by Mahone’s apparent adoption of the Republican policies of debt reduction, lower taxes, and school funding. All these policies were popular among African Americans, and many of these black people were hopeful that the Republican rhetoric of Mahone’s Readjusters would equate to tangible benefits for them in Virginia in the wake of a Republican withdrawal.  

The Readjusters’ advocacy for black suffrage was politically expedient in light of the Republican retreat from Reconstruction. Alignment with the Republican Party was not William Mahone’s original plan, but both he and his fellow white Readjusters could not overlook the large number of African American voters in Virginia who supported debt readjustment and were frustrated by the Virginia Republicans’ relative impotence. Two of Mahone’s lieutenants discussed the opportunity the black vote provided them in 1879. One of them argued that, “it is incumbent upon us as Readjusters, to make use of them [black men] as voters on all important....

63 Summers, *Railroads*, 29, 158. As Summers describes: “in the greatest reversal of partisan alignments in the nineteenth century, they erased the massive Congressional majority Republicans had enjoyed since the South’s secession, transforming the party’s 110-vote margin in the House into a Democratic majority of sixty seats,” in the election of 1874. On the importance of railroads to Republicans during this period, that in some ways, lined up with Mahone’s vision of their potential Summers wrote: “Railroads had been a means to an end. They stood for the sort of South that Republicans hoped to create. Party members did not only want to bring commerce to the cotton states, but a new economic order and different attitudes toward work and wealth...Railroads would produce a society in which prosperity might alleviate race hatreds and free the black laborer from dependence on his former master.”; See also Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*, 523-525. Foner’s section: “The Politics of Depression” is the most useful summary of the depression that followed the 1873 financial crisis and its impact on the goals of the Republican party during the 1870s.
questions. For without them, we can do nothing within ourselves, for we are weak as yet, and need all the assistance we can possibly get, And, since there is a great revolution in politics in this state…now is the time, while excitement is up, for us, as Readj [sic]…to use every effort to coax the colored people into our party.” This letter affirmed what Mahone surely realized: only the black vote could sustain the Readjusters as a third-party. Importantly, nothing about this suggested a restructuring of the racial hierarchy in the state, as this same lieutenant described how the Readjusters should give black people “our political sympathy and fellowship (but I mean by this, that we shall put ourselves on social equality with them what-ever, no, never) to induce them to come into the ranks of the Readjuster Party.” Mahone and his inner circle understood the potential for electoral success if black men voted for them in the strength that they had typically given the Republicans and that, in their opinion, no drastic changes on social equality were necessary to accomplish this.64

When the Readjusters failed to fully dislodge the Conservative Party from control of the state in 1879 and 1880, Mahone worked to unseat the Conservative elite for good through a coalition with the Republican Party, with the defense of black suffrage as one of the Readjusters’ central issues. Mahone’s planned Readjuster-Republican fusion faced stringent opposition from current Republican President Andrew Garfield and the “Straight-Out” Republican faction. But when Garfield was assassinated in September of 1881, his successor, Chester A. Arthur, was more favorable to Mahone’s plan and northern Republicans backed the Readjusters politically.

64 W.P. Epperson to Samuel Yates Gilliam, Dec 23, 1879, Box 4, Gilliam Family Papers, UVA; See also H.S. Orkey to William C. Elam, Sept 5, 1881, Box 34, WMP. The paternalism and prejudices that underscored white Readjusters’ treatment of black voters is further demonstrated by a letter between two Mahone lieutenants on the topic of campaign literature. Orkey described that he wanted his “simple documents, that can be easily read and understood by the colored people” to be distributed to black men. He said this would assure their support for the Readjusters in said county.
and financially. Black Virginians supported the Republican Party in national elections, but realized the party had little power in Virginia. The Readjusters represented a chance to change this and black Virginians flocked to the movement. Mahone understood that the debt issue created space in the Conservative ranks for a splinter movement and he was prepared to accept almost any platform that would give him success.  

Never one to openly discuss his ideological views in the past, Mahone took an idealistic public stance toward black suffrage and political representation as soon as he organized the Readjusters in 1879, though he remained somewhat vague as to the role political parties should play. Mahone stated that “in respect to the question and in the exercise of the right of a freeman. In my judgement the question stands above party and rises high above man.” With Readjuster and Republican unity accomplished in 1881, Mahone was appointed to the United States Senate where he caucused with the Republicans, who promoted him to chairman of two Senate committees. Encouraged by these developments, Mahone doubled down on liberal rhetoric about the protection of black suffrage, for which Republicans routinely praised him. He stated that the Readjusters’ primary mission concerned “equal rights for all,” and that, “I believe universal suffrage the only safety for the people. I want every man to vote white or black, and I want him to vote as he pleases…and to be neither threatened beforehand nor ostracized afterward for expressing his free opinion.” The Readjusters’ actions, both in their policies and on election day, support that Mahone was committed to African American suffrage because it was a winning

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65 For the results of the Readjuster election in 1879 see Moore, Two Paths to the New South, 46n1, 69-70, 78, 82-85; Summers, Railroads, Reconstruction, 146-150. Summers similarly supports the argument that Republicans had enacted many radial reforms but had ultimately fallen short of their lofty goals by the end of the 1870s. He wrote that “Republicans platforms overflowed with worthy causes demanding legislative action, (like debt reduction. School funding, and defending black suffrage) but that they also, “took the black vote for granted and concentrated, therefore, on winning the confidence and support of at least a respectable minority of the commercial and political elite.”
issue among his new friends, and it granted him a new political lease on life in Virginia.

However, just like many Republicans, he had no real plan to protect universal suffrage for black people as it came under attack in the 1880s.66

Mahone’s time as an essentially Republican Senator convinced him that black men had a place in Virginia politics, even if he understood that place as being irrevocably beneath white men. This pragmatic view on race is demonstrated in his letters. In July of 1881, a Readjuster wrote to Senator Mahone about some troubling comments he had expressed toward black voters. Mahone had given an interview where he had allegedly expressed “a most decided indifference respecting the Republicans of Virginia and total apathy toward colored Republicans.” In another letter Mahone discussed “humoring their political action” and through this, Mahone stated, “they can, and they may exercise important influence in thinking.” However, Mahone ended this letter by stating that African Americans “are a race acting distinctively as such...[they have] the free enjoyment of life liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” a statement that no white Democrat in Virginia would have been likely to make. As Steven Hahn outlines, Mahone believed positions in the state legislature and above should be reserved for white men, with lower level offices given to black people to placate both races. Therefore, Mahone viewed the black vote as a necessity to his coalition and entertained no ideas about truly radical changes to Virginia’s white supremacist social order, but his success on the issue of black suffrage perhaps convinced him that black voters would allow Virginia to exert real influence on the national political stage.

Mahone’s paternalism remained apparent in all his discussions on black voters in the

66 Mahone was appointed chairman of the committee on agriculture and he also sat on the committees of public buildings and grants, naval affairs, the committee on post offices and post roads, and the committee on education and labor. Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, 212; William Mahone to B. P. B Laud, May 11, 1879, vol 31, 106, WMP; “Senator Mahone. His Position Defined by Himself,” Richmond Whig, April 23, 1881, Scrapbook 19:8, Box 12, WMP.
Readjusters’ most successful years, but his expanded overtures toward black political actors set him apart from other white Virginians who believed any African American voting was a threat to white supremacy when faced with the Readjusters’ success.67

For William Mahone, and a select few other white Readjusters, black suffrage was an expedient means for resolving the racial antagonisms in Virginia that they viewed as interfering with the prosperity of the state. Thus, an acceptance of black suffrage was a way to remove a barrier to Virginia’s financial and economic progress by ending fierce debates on race that divided the white electorate. With Virginia seemingly on this path in 1881, Mahone expressed relief that the issues of slavery and black suffrage would no longer hinder Virginia’s progress. In one of his first Senate speeches Mahone stated that “The Readjusters of Virginia have no feeling of hostility, no words of unkindness for the colored man. His freedom has come, and whether by purpose or by accident thank God that among other issues which so long distracted country and restrained its growth was concluded, and I trust forever by the results of the sanguinary struggle between the sections.”68 In Mahone’s view, if black men were accepted as voters in Virginia then the Readjusters would most likely continue to be the primary beneficiaries and this, in turn, would allow Mahone to remain the principal figure in building the Commonwealth. The

67 “Senator Mahone. His Position Defined by Himself,” Richmond Whig, April 23, 1881, Scrapbook 19:8, Box 12, WMP; William C. Elam to William Mahone, Sept 3, 1881, Box 34. To organize black voters Mahone’s lieutenants often requested black speakers to address large gatherings of African Americans in churches and other gatherings. Richmond Whig editor William Elam wrote to Mahone that he would be “very pleased” if Mahone could send them a “good colored speaker” to address an African American church in Goochland; Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 408.
68 “Mahone, A Free Ballot and an Honest Count,” Allegan Journal, April 9, 1881, Scrapbook 19:129-130, Box 212; “Standing by Mahone,” Richmond Whig, March 18, 1881, Scrapbook 19:134, Box 212. Mahone argued that the Readjusters’ cause concerned the future of Virginia. Before the gubernatorial election of 1882 he stated that the approaching election “is a contest that reaches beyond party lines; it is a fight for the relief of the people; the education of the masses…it is an uncompromising assault upon the power and methods which for a decade have kept Virginia in antagonism to the progressive spirit of the age.”
successful election of Readjusters to the General Assembly, United States Congress, and countless local offices make it probable this was Mahone’s genuine outlook at the time. Away for senatorial duty in Washington D.C. Mahone had perhaps blinded himself to the building discomfort among white Virginians over the Readjusters’ policies.

William Mahone offered black Virginians a practical means to defend their suffrage through a vote for his party, even if many black people thought the Readjusters’ benefits stopped short of what they deserved. An African American Readjuster, M. L. Price, wrote to Mahone about his unhappiness with the Readjusters’ policies toward black Virginians, to which Mahone replied, “I need not remind you that the colored people are now restored to the practical enjoyment of every right…guaranteed to a citizen, by the constitution and laws of the country. The colored people are now at the most critical juncture of their history since the freedom of all.” Mahone told Price that black Virginians must remain loyal to the Readjuster Party for having secured their “actual freedom” and stated that “I need not say it is essential if the colored man would preserve his equal rights at the polls, before the law, and in the jury box, and if he would keep open the schools to the education of his children.” These actions had been passed by the Readjuster-controlled General Assembly, and Mahone and black Virginians were aware that a return to Democratic control might undo all these benefits. Mahone’s response was essentially a threat to “vote for me or else,” but in the political context of the time, Mahone and black Virginians understood that the Readjusters’ continued success depended upon their unity at the ballot box. Mahone emphasized the threat of a Democratic victory before the pivotal election of 1883, stating that such a victory would “imperil everything which has been gained for him [the black man]…he cannot afford to separate on any pretext from the real friends who have conducted him to this haven of safety and full citizenship.” Mahone was quite accurately
presenting the Readjuster Party as the only coalition of its type in Virginia that would protect black suffrage and other rights, and most black men felt this was reason enough to support him, even if his use of the term “full citizenship” was inaccurate. 69

The northern press viewed Mahone as an influential figure they could use to promote Republican policy, and they generally praised him without reservation from 1880-1884. A Michigan paper lamented the voting practices in the South but commented that “in Virginia at least there shall be a free suffrage, a full vote and an honest count.” Northern papers routinely emphasized the Readjusters policies on black suffrage. The Independent in New York published an article in 1881 that said Mahone “had done more than any other man in Virginia whether he be Democrat or Republican to secure the colored people in that state their political rights and give them protection.” Mahone certainly had done more than Virginia’s Conservatives in his inclusion of black men in the Readjuster Party but these Republican papers essentially praised the Readjusters based off platitudes in Mahone’s Richmond Whig paper and provided little analysis of the origin of the Readjuster movement. A Republican paper in Florida commented that “the success of Mahone marks the beginning of a new era in southern politics. The triumph of the Readjuster and Republican coalition in Virginia shows that with time the prejudice of the southern whites against negro suffrage is fast giving way and disappearing in practical politics.” These papers based their declarations on Mahone’s own language and the fact that he caucused

69 William Mahone to M.L. Price, Feb 15, 1883, Vol 37:405-407, WMP; To another black man Mahone wrote that he was “sorry to see that you do not realize what the Readjuster Party has done for your race. The colored man now enjoy (sic) in Virginia the fullest rights of citizenship—precisely the same rights as are secured to the white man.” William Mahone to A. Davidson, March 12, 1883 vol 38:364, WMP.
with Republicans in the Senate and they showed very little engagement in the state of politics in Virginia which had only become more divided due to Mahone’s actions.\textsuperscript{70}

The highpoint of the Readjusters’ success, and Mahone’s idealistic rhetoric, occurred with the election of William Cameron over Conservative Funder John Warwick Daniel to the governor’s mansion in the fall of 1881 as a Readjuster. Republicans and Readjusters alike described this election as a clear triumph of biracial government that had so far been attempted unsuccessfully across the South.\textsuperscript{71} Mahone called this victory a blessing on all Virginians that will continue “until the government of every county shall be of the people, by the people, and for the people…manhood suffrage is the security to the man of his liberties [and] education.” Cameron’s election was in large measure due to the Republican Party elites who had financed Mahone’s payment of poll taxes for thousands of black voters in Virginia who gave roughly ninety percent of their vote to Cameron in most counties.\textsuperscript{72}

Cameron’s election was only possible through Mahone’s shrewd conciliatory actions with the Republicans and orchestration of their fusion with the Readjusters. The Readjusters now controlled both Houses of the Virginia General Assembly and gave black Readjusters increased prominence within the movement through the election of fifteen African American

\textsuperscript{70} “Mahone, A Free Ballot and an Honest Count,” Allegan Journal, April 9, 1881, Scrapbook 19:129, Box 212; The Independent, March 24, 1881, Scrapbook 19:133, Box 212; “Portentous Signs,” The Florida Weekly Telegraph, Scrapbook 28:16-17, Box 215.

\textsuperscript{71} Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 382.

\textsuperscript{72} William Mahone to W. Smith, November 21, 1882, Vol 35:295, WMP; “An Address to the Republicans of Virginia,” 1881, Scrapbook 22:22, Box 213. The Readjuster convention that nominated Cameron framed his campaign as the dawn of a new era that meant the “annihilation of intolerance-liberalization of public sentiment, and more important than all else to the cause of loyalty, its success means the destruction of sectionalism in national politics.”; For a breakdown of the votes for Cameron see Warrock-Richardson Almanack (Richmond, Va., 1882), 28-29. Cameron received 113,473 votes to Daniel’s 100,758.
representatives between the two bodies.\textsuperscript{73} Once all their representatives took their seats in 1882, the Readjusters accomplished their major goal of debt reduction with the passage of the Riddleberger Act which cut a third of the state’s debt and cut taxes by twenty percent. Cameron’s administration went still further and abolished the onerous poll tax for voting and a degrading symbol of slavery, the whipping post. Black Virginians reacted positively to these acts and a pamphlet written by a group of them stated that “we think we can see the dawn of a brighter day,” and it asked black men in Virginia to give their full support to the Readjusters who will “permanently settle the antagonism of the races.” Mahone had initially resisted an alliance with the Republican Party in order to keep the Readjusters as an independent movement and attract the support of white Virginians, but Cameron’s election demonstrated a fundamental shift in allying the movement with Republican interests, a move that Virginia’s Conservative elites would not leave unchallenged.

\textsuperscript{73} Moore, \textit{Two Paths}, 82.
“The War is Ended, the Wounds Must Heal”: Mahone Advocates Reconciliation

Figure 5: Mahone (pictured in the middle of the first row) regularly toured the Crater battlefield with veterans from the North and South to remember his most well-known wartime action. Here he is pictured with members of the 57th Massachusetts Infantry in 1887. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction number LC C-DIG-ppmsca-56346)

William Mahone’s policies gave hope to northern Republicans, but overall, his rhetoric of reconciliation was never accepted by most white Virginians, many of whom were former Confederates and served in Congress. No comprehensive study on Confederate participation in government after the war exists, but if Mahone’s career is any measure, these former Confederates wielded powerful influence. One tally concluded that “of the 585 former Confederate civilian and military leaders, 418 after the war held elective or appointive office in the state, local, or federal governments.” Mahone’s newspaper and his supporters frequently discussed the praiseworthy reception that their “progressive policies” were met with across the nation, but much less noted was the reaction of these Confederate veterans in government or the
many white Virginians who disagreed sharply with his rhetoric. The final straw for many of these ex-Confederates was Mahone’s decision to caucus with the Republicans in the United States Senate when he took his seat in 1881, giving the Republicans a majority. Mahone’s allegiance to the Republicans might have been sustainable if the Republican Party had a strong base of support in Virginia, but Mahone’s Readjuster movement had been the closest they had come to being viable in the state and many former Confederates lead the opposition to Senator Mahone and the Readjusters.74

Throughout the postwar years it is clear William Mahone believed he could lead Virginia in reunification with the North, and he never openly brooded on the Confederacy’s defeat. In one of his first speeches Mahone stated that as soon as the war ended he concluded that the South “must necessarily not only abandon all aspirations for political independence, save in the Union, but that its only hope for prosperity and happiness depended upon a hearty alignment with the best thought of the ruling section of the country.” Mahone knew northern capital was beneficial for himself and for Virginia’s economy and this always transcended any lingering animosity toward his former enemy. In February of 1883, he wrote a letter to president Arthur to thank him for his support of the Readjusters and Virginia itself from which “has come an honest endeavor to overthrow sectional and race contentions and to enforce the constitution and the laws.” This was Mahone’s vision of a Virginia fully in compliance with the laws of the United States and

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74 For the current scholarship on Civil War veterans’ postwar views see Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). Janney’s work argues that for all the public reconciliation between veterans, most of them never agreed on the causes of the war and what it settled; Clemont Eaton, *The Waning of the Old South Civilization*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1968), 151. Eaton did not explicitly define what constitutes a “leader” in his study, but he does mention that 73 of the men served in Congress following the war. Section quote is from an article in Mahone’s *Whig* during his first year as a senator. On April 23, 1881, the *Whig* declared that “the war is ended; the wounds must heal…Mason and Dixon’s line shall be obliterated. The sections shall blend together into one,” Scrapbook 19, Box 212, WMP.
living up to the Reconstruction era amendments. Arthur’s support, with the subsequent flow of Republican money into the Readjuster Party, was the major benefit of Mahone’s stance.\footnote{75 “Senator Mahone. His Position Defined by Himself,” \textit{The Richmond Whig}, April 23, 1881, Scrapbook 19:8, Box 212; William Mahone to Chester A. Arthur, Feb 18- March 17, 1883, Vol 38:101-102, WMP.}

**Limits of Reconciliation**

Mahone’s alliance with the Republicans catapulted the Readjusters to their greatest success in Virginia, but this alliance was interpreted as a serious threat by Virginia’s Conservative Party. The Readjusters’ domination of the black vote was a growing concern for these men, and they would not abide the specter of a strong Republican Party in Virginia, the white South’s enemy from the war and Reconstruction. Senator Ben Hill of Georgia, a Democrat and Confederate Senator during the war, demonstrated that reconciliation only existed between Readjusters and Republicans when he challenged Mahone on the Senate floor. Hill said that Mahone owed his allegiance to the Conservative Party of Virginia who elected him and to the southern Democratic Party at large. Mahone replied that he had proudly fought for the South and had not apologized for his role in the war and would not apologize for it now in the Senate. However, in his opinion, the South was now “a mere geographical expression and no longer has political idealization.” He went on to tell other senators that “I was not elected as a Democrat. I am a Readjuster and owe my election to the Readjusters.” Ensconced in a Republican-controlled Senate and fresh on the heels of William Cameron’s victory in Virginia, Mahone likely felt safe in distancing himself from Virginia's Conservative Party and the other southern Democrats.
Republicans were quick to come to Mahone’s defense, without any apparent irony, by touting his war record.\(^76\)

Northern and Republican newspapers argued that Mahone’s record as a Confederate soldier demonstrated that he was more qualified than any other former Confederate to be Virginia’s Senator. The *New York Herald* stated that “Mr Mahone has a better war record as a Southern Confederate general than any other man in Congress.” Pieces like this one intended to expose how foolish southerners’ charges of betrayal were, and an Ohio paper stated that “a comparison of war records between Hill and Mahone is very disadvantageous to Hill.” Not all northern papers were positive on Mahone’s military career. One Iowa paper reminded its readers that Mahone had “fought to destroy the Union” and only those who “slew without tears or sorrow” should now embrace him.\(^77\) However, most of these accounts offered nothing but praise for Mahone’s role as a Confederate general. With the Democratic party in control across every former Confederate state, the Republicans were clearly ready to embrace any challenger against them that emerged, regardless of said challenger’s past record.\(^78\)

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\(^76\) “Speech of Mahone” *Allegan Journal*, April 9, 1881, Scrapbook 19:130, Box 212; Ibid., “The Beginning of the End,” 35. See also: Foner, *Reconstruction*, 415. That the blowback against Mahone was primarily related to his Republican allegiance is evidenced by the career of Ben Hill himself. Hill advocated for black suffrage and Reconciliation with the northern states to show that southerners accepted the “accomplished facts of the war.” However, Senator Hill did this from within the Conservative ranks and thus there was no threat of Republican influence in Georgia, whereas Mahone’s allegiance represented a refutation of not only party but the South at large.

\(^77\) “Mahone’s War Record,” *The Galveston News*, April 5, 1881, Scrapbook 19:130, Box 212; “Hill and Mahone,” *The Bristol News*, March 29, 1881, Scrapbook 19:56, Box 212; “Mahone’s Triumph,” *The Wilmington Post*, March 27, 1881, Scrapbook 19:56, Box 212. Even southern papers commented that Hill had miscalculated. “Never did a man more completely misapprehend the situation, than did Hill of Georgia,” wrote the *Post; Daily Nonpareil*, April 15, 1881, Scrapbook 19, Box 212.

\(^78\) Mahone’s role in the slaughter of black prisoners following the Battle of the Crater was absent from almost all treatments of his career in the northern Press. One veteran from Pennsylvania blamed the death of black soldiers on their commander and not on Mahone. “The ‘butcher’ was the general who ordered the colored troops into the fight. We always looked upon Mahone as an able and honorable soldier, and never heard of any unmilitary act being done under his orders.” “Endorsing Mahone,” *Richmond Dispatch*, April 8, 1881, Box 212.
Contrary to Republican papers, southern accounts stressed that Mahone’s Republican allegiance in the Senate invalidated his confederate service. A paper from New Orleans wrote: “when he [Mahone] made that declaration to the world, he became a monster in the eyes of all those who still adhere to the Lost Cause and hope for the resurrection of the Southern Confederacy.” Additionally, prominent Conservative papers, like *The Richmond Dispatch*, portrayed Mahone as a failed businessman who seized control of the issue of Readjustment from Conservative politicians for his own designs. In 1882, *The Dispatch* said that Mahone was a “bigoted despot and the most vindictive tyrant that ever thrived in a Republican government.” These southern white responses equated any deals with the Republicans as supporting the enemy of the white South. For these papers, policy was irrelevant in comparison to the threat of a Republican takeover of Virginia with Mahone’s help.79

Senator Hill’s attack emboldened Mahone’s Conservative rivals who worried Mahone would wrest control of the state away from them by giving the vote to poor white Virginians and black men. As previously mentioned, many of these traditional Conservatives were attached to notions of southern honor and, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown argued, the very system of Democracy, and the equality it promoted through suffrage, undermined southern honor by invalidating the system of reputation and class that it rested upon. As Mahone embarked on his reform movements in state government he commented that “this twaddle about the honor of the state is sheer nonsense.” Nonsense perhaps to the industrious William Mahone, but not to traditional Conservatives such as William Royall. Royall was a Confederate cavalryman during the war and served as a lawyer for Virginia’s Conservatives, who favored complete debt repayment, and he

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eventually left Virginia for North Carolina in a rage when the Readjusters triumphed in 1881 and 1882. In his 1909 memoir, Royall stated that when it came to Mahone “I hated him, and he is the only man I ever hated.” Royall demonstrated in his autobiography that even more odious than Mahone’s stance as a debt-payer was his recruitment of black voters in Virginia. According to Royall the “negroes” always voted against the whites and it was a betrayal for Mahone to utilize them to his advantage, and that “all the negroes and the worthless whites supported him.” Royall also noted how Mahone avoided several duels in this period, even one with his former ally Governor Kemper. In Royall’s mind Mahone had already shirked his honor as a man by avoiding these duels, and now his political activity threatened the honor of Virginia itself and its white elites.\(^8\)

Mahone’s rhetoric never implied that Virginia would be controlled by the northern Republicans or black people. He always advocated for Virginia to have a leading role in the United States and saw a prosperous relationship with the North as the means to achieve this. Just as in his railroad days, Mahone believed that his leadership in Virginia would facilitate its revival as the most prosperous southern state. On Virginia’s role he commented that “it is eminently proper that Virginia should lead…in the restoration of harmony and fraternal relations between all the cities of our common and undivided country.” While many white Democrats would have agreed with this, they took issue with Mahone because they could not control him, and this was

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\(^8\) Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South*, 31; Degler, *The Other South*, 275; William, Royall, *Some Reminiscences* (New York, Neale Publishing Company, 1909), 81, 103-104; See also: Noe, “Damned North Carolinians” and “Brave Virginians,” 1113. James Lane was another ex-Confederate who had engaged in public attacks on Mahone. Lane’s hatred toward Mahone, like Royall’s, peaked after Mahone entered the Senate and “grew over the years to something approaching paranoia.”; “We Can’t Take any Stock Down With It,” *Middle Georgia Argus*, March 31, 1881, Scrapbook 19:77, Box 212. Despite Democratic attacks on Mahone, the Argus was one of several southern papers that defended him based on his past military service, even following his switch to the Republican party. It stated, “we can't see how any Confederate soldier can feel anything but mortification when the name of Mahone or Longstreet is held up to ridicule or reproach.”
even more threatening because of the influence his movement had on Virginia’s black voters. A statement of black voters in 1881 said they were supporting the Readjusters for their protection of the political rights of black men but that “the Readjuster Party does more than this: it cultivates respect and attachment for the Union—that Union which we love so much and to which we are so attached.”

81 “Address to the Readjusters of Virginia,” June 2, 1881, Scrapbook 23:4, Box 212.
Republicans Embrace Mahone’s Rhetoric

Figure 6: “More Than Their Match” Northern Republicans viewed Mahone as the best method they had left to break up the Democratic Party in the South. This cartoon from Harpers Weekly joyfully mocked the Virginia Democrats dismay over Mahone’s decision to caucus with the Republicans in the Senate. ( Scrapbook 19, 1881, Box 212, WMP.)

It was Mahone's ability to antagonize the southern Democrats that endeared him to the Republicans, and they saw his sparring with Ben Hill in the Senate as proof of this. From the moment he aligned himself with their cause, the Republicans portrayed Mahone as a revolutionary political leader who would be capable of unshackling the South from the traditional power of the Democrats and create a viable basis for the Republican Party to expand in the South. The Warren Tribune of Ohio commented that “the new senator from Virginia has already become famous…his refusal to be bull-dozed by the Democratic caucus, have won for him the esteem of all honest men.” Republican papers as far away as Los Angeles, California saw the rise of senator Mahone as proof that “The Readjusters of Virginia are the advance guard
of a considerable element which will shortly make itself felt in the disruption of the solid South.”

Republicans had been willing to compromise with Mahone and the Virginia Conservative Party in the election of Gilbert Walker, but their foothold in Virginia had only gotten smaller since. Mahone’s leading role in that compromise as a prominent Conservative figure was proof for many Republicans that Mahone could lead another such compromise movement in Virginia, and maybe inspire similar movements across the South.82

The Republicans had tried and failed to build a viable base of white support in the South during Reconstruction and many viewed prominent white men like Mahone as the only chance left. Mahone and the Readjusters were portrayed in highly optimistic terms by many of these Republican leaders and papers as the dawn of a new age of third-party movements that were essential in allowing Republicans to win elections in former Confederate states, and ultimately, destroy the Democratic party from within. Republicans viewed supporting Mahone, and reconciliation with white southerners like him, as a bulwark against the resurgent ex-Confederate influence in politics which they considered a “fearful menace to the peace and prosperity of the Union.” As the *New York Times* described, “Bourbon rule in the South can only be destroyed by a division in the ranks in the Democrats of that section. The Republican organization as it exists now, cannot compass that destruction.” Republicans viewed the Democrats in the South as “the odious vestige of the Confederacy,” and their newspapers often professed an irrational level of optimism. One proclaimed that “Mahone is the first step forward and there are more to follow…Republicans will stand by him until the Solid-South is broken.”83

Republicans predicted the downfall of the Democratic party in the South, even as the Readjusters collapsed and Mahone was increasingly vilified by white Virginians. *The State Republican* paper published numerous editorials about Mahone’s last bid to be governor in 1889, nearly all of them attributing Republican “success” in Virginia to Mahone. One man from Powhatan wrote that “the advance of the Republican Party in Virginia is due to the resolute, untiring, manly and judicious leadership of William Mahone.” Another Republican stated that “Mahone has done more for the Republican Party in Virginia and the South than any living man.” While there is some truth behind this lavish praise, Mahone and the Republicans had seen major reverses since he had sided with them as a senator in 1881. The Readjuster Party had collapsed, Democrat Fitzhugh Lee had supplanted Readjuster William Cameron for governor, and Virginia had voted for Democrat Grover Cleveland in the presidential election of 1884. In 1889 especially, Mahone was routinely criticized for appointing former Democrats and other personal friends into Virginia's Republican leadership. Mahone was comfortable working with the Republicans, as he had few friends left in Virginia’s Conservative Party, but there is no evidence he ever viewed his actions in the framework of a national strategy. The success of the Readjusters was not replicated by the numerous other third-party movements across the South that *The National Republican* hoped for when it described William Mahone as “a leader foremost among a thousand who will follow in his footsteps.”

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“Mahone’s Victory,” *The National Review*, Nov 26, 1881, Scrapbook 28:24, Box 215. *The Review*, opined that “if such a contemptible creature as Mahone can win Virginia, what may we not expect of other Southern states?”; See Also “Virginia’s Progress Under the Readjusters’ Rule” *The National Republican*, Scrapbook 28:57, Box 215. *The National Republican* even compared Mahone to the late President Lincoln as an emancipator of sorts for Virginia’s white men who were controlled by the Democratic elite. It stated that “His name will go ringing along down the corridors of time side by side with that of the martyred Lincoln.”

The Readjusters’ Foundation: Mahone’s distribution of Federal Patronage

Figure 7: “Patronage Mill” William Mahone (pictured wearing the Confederate jacket in the middle) used his position as Senator to distribute extensive patronage to his Readjuster supporters in Virginia. This was typical of political practices of the day, but Mahone’s enemies could not tolerate his control over jobs and offices in Virginia. (Scrapbook 41, 1888-1889, Box 221, WMP.)

Mahone’s greatest contribution to the success of the Readjusters was his calculated distribution of federal patronage to his supporters as a Senator that ensured their loyalty to the coalition. After Mahone secured the support of President Chester A. Arthur in 1881, Arthur rewarded Mahone with 1,970 government jobs to fill as he pleased. These patronage postings were handed out to loyal Readjusters and provided black Virginians with opportunities that surpassed anything the Republicans had been able to accomplish in these areas. This was a fundamentally quid-pro-quo relationship, but it did generate considerable optimism among black Virginians who supported Mahone throughout his political career. This practice of patronage was termed “Mahoneism” by his opponents, to emphasize its cronyism, but it was far from unusual
considering the centrality of patronage to Gilded Age politics. The power of U.S. senators to hand out patronage in their states was used to dictate loyalty to party regardless of any policy concerns, something Mahone recognized could sustain his shift away from the Virginia Conservative Party. Mahone primarily distributed patronage to people and counties that he needed to win the next election, but these patronage benefits came closest to the establishment of genuine racial reconciliation during the Readjuster years.⁸⁵

For Mahone, black men working and voting for him was the primary motivation for distribution of patronage. However, patronage also accomplished Mahone’s goal of revitalizing Virginia’s economy through the participation of all citizens in the work force. Mahone said that patronage “elevates them [black people] as citizens,” and, “promotes their productive capacity” but he always made it explicitly clear that patronage depended on the procurement of votes for the Readjusters. To one likely black supporter, he said that he must “carry the colored vote of the county in this fall election by a certain majority,” if he was to get a job in Washington. It was evident that these exhortations by Mahone had an effect, as the man replied that “I will use every effort from now until the polls close on the 8th day of Nov to gain a great victory.” When African Americans worked for Mahone’s campaign he often rewarded them. Ross Hamilton was a prominent black politician who served in the Virginia General Assembly from 1869–1882, and 1889–1891, as a representative of Mecklenburg County. He requested travel funds from Mahone and Mahone even lobbied for him to receive a vacation, but this was followed up by asking him

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⁸⁵ Degler, *The Other South*, 291. Degler breaks down the postings as “200 offices in the Treasury Department, 1,700 in the Post Office, 70 in the courts, and an unspecified number at the Norfolk Naval Yard”; Frances E. Lee, “Patronage, Logrolls, and ‘Polarization’: Congressional parties of the Gilded Age, 1876–1896.” *Studies in American Political Development* 30, no. 1 (2016): 1–12, 117, 121. Lee argues that “politicians focused so much on patronage because it was central to the organization, management and mobilization of the era’s parties.”
to go and stump for Readjuster candidates in Mecklenburg County.\textsuperscript{86} The importance of Mahone’s patronage to black voters is demonstrated by the countless black people who supported the Readjuster movement and wrote to Mahone about post office jobs and other employment concerns. Overall, applicants to Mahone received a mixed result, because Mahone regularly filled vacancies based on who could help the Readjusters win various counties, even if Mahone outwardly portrayed his decision making as impartial to people writing him for positions.\textsuperscript{87}

Even though Black Virginians held a minority of the offices in the Virginia House and Senate, the patronage they received was a crucial part of Mahone’s strategy and not just a token effort of appeasement. Mahone’s call for “competent young colored men” typically meant a job in the post office, naval yard, or school system. It is important to note that while Mahone likely agreed with a naval yard foreman in Norfolk who wrote him that “this is one of the places a colored man is competent for,” the patronage jobs he filled with black people were essential to the Readjusters’ success. Mahone needed loyal Readjusters in key postings, especially the post offices around Virginia. The post office was a vital way to disseminate Readjuster literature across the state and its workers often doubled as political organizers. There were hundreds of these jobs to be filled and Mahone relied on the organization in black communities to send him

\textsuperscript{86} Michael J. Jackson to William Mahone, Sept 14, 1881, Box 34, WMP; William Mahone to Anna Weber, March 12, 1883, Vol 38:313; ibid., William Mahone to Ross Hamilton, March 7,12:313,366; For a contemporary example of another white Virginian who favored education for black people as a means to increase Virginia’s prosperity see Lewis Harvie Blair, \textit{A Southern Prophecy: The Prosperity of the South Dependent Upon the elevation of the Negro} (1889; Boston: Little and Brown, 1964). Blair would eventually retract his advocacy for black suffrage and was openly in favor of Jim Crow by the time of his death in 1916.

\textsuperscript{87} For examples of this, William Mahone to Mr. Edmondson, Feb 15, 1883, Vol 38:30, WMP. Mahone stated that “it will not do for me to be controlled by personal friendships in such matters.”
candidates. This system allowed black men to participate in, and benefit from, the political activities of the Readjusters.88

Patronage appointments were the crucial link that held the Readjusters together, and African Americans stressed to Mahone that their support for him hinged on receiving them. In July of 1881, a black Readjuster from Petersburg offered himself up to be the city’s Post Master and stated that if Mahone appointed him it would “do an act of justice to the negro race of Virginia, and at the same time perform a strategic move on the political chessboard [which] will make it almost impossible to find a colored man of any intelligence, opposed to the coalition of Republicans with ‘your’ party…your political experience will enable you readily to see that the colored people will rally to the cause you espouse; if such an appointment is made.” This letter demonstrated that black people viewed post office jobs as a genuine commitment to their welfare by the Readjuster Party. This system of patronage, so common in Gilded Age politics, was thus mutually reinforcing for white Readjusters like Mahone and black Virginians and it directly complimented another key issue on which they found common ground on, education.89

Public education had always brought out bitter factionalism in Virginia, and next to the state debt, it was the strongest issue for Mahone and the Readjusters. The traditional Conservative attitude resisted funds for public schooling at all costs with governor Frederick Holliday commenting on the eve of the Readjuster movement that “our fathers did not need free schools to make them what they were.” Holliday’s refusal to fund public education and his continued refusal to readjust the state’s debt thus gave a major impetus for the Readjusters who

88 MP, Box 48, 1882. James W. Edloe to William Mahone, June 5, 1882, Box 48, WMP; U. D. Groner to William Mahone, June 10, 1882, Box 48, WMP; See also Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 379, 383.
89 M.M. Demortle to William Mahone, July 1, 1881, Box 32, WMP; Hahn, A Nation Under our Feet, 381.
argued that public education for all white Virginians regardless of race was essential for Virginia’s prosperity. As Mahone stated, “the best interests of the state demand that the large class of persons recently admitted to the privileges of citizenship [black people] should receive careful and ample instruction.”90 The Readjuster Party made good on their claims and provided opportunities for black Virginians with adequate funding for public education and opportunities to be teachers in their own schools for the first time since the Civil War ended. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that Readjuster policies on education galvanized black Virginians the most.

The Readjusters also reformed universities to fit their goal of “modernizing” all areas of the state. Mahone believed universities, in general, were teaching policies out of line with the direction of the state. To remedy this, the Readjusters revitalized and changed the curriculum of the University of Virginia to broaden its courses for the present day and enroll students from less wealthy backgrounds. Additionally, Mahone routinely expressed support for public schooling in Virginia and stated that “I am a friend of all of them” in a letter appealing for funding for his alma mater: The Virginia Military Institute. For black Virginians, the Readjusters provided $100,000 to construct a Normal and Collegiate Institute for black people in Petersburg in 1882, which is today Virginia State University.91 On the national stage, Mahone supported the Blair Education Bill which was brought before Congress several times in the 1880s, but never made it out of the Senate, and would have provided federal funding for public schools and thereby guarantee black people access to them regardless of state politics. These policies represented a sincere commitment by Mahone and the Readjusters to education for both races in Virginia.

90 Degler, The Other South, 271, 278, 283.
91 William Mahone to Dr. Barnes April 9, 1876, Vol 22:393, WMP; Degler, The Other South, 283-284.
Between 1879 and 1883 black schools increased from 675 to 1,715 and enrollment from 35,768 to 90,948. The Readjusters’ funding for public schools, and appointment of black teachers, elicited the greatest enthusiasm among black people who had been actively campaigning for black teachers, school board members, and school presidents throughout Reconstruction.\(^2\)

Letters from black Virginians to the Readjuster leadership show that many were genuinely inspired by these education reforms, and many supported the Readjusters over the Republicans because of them. This inspiration is apparent in a letter written to Governor Cameron by a black schoolteacher in Alexandria named, S. L. Tundas. He wrote that “I am a col[ored] Republican and have been always as a col[ored] man can be nothing else consistently yet at the present time in the present issue I think it is the indispensable duty of Repubs [sic] to support the candidates of the June [Readjuster] convention. I intend to fight it to the bitter end under the Readjuster banner.” Tundas’s letter demonstrated how he viewed supporting Mahone’s policies as the foundation for additional cooperation with the Readjusters. As Tundas described, “I have been trying to impress the col[ored] people…that our salvation depends on the success of the Readj party this fall. I am tired of working to make enemies I wish to make friends and I think the best way to do that is for all good citizens irrespective of race color or previous condition if they want to see the state prosper will vote the Readj ticket.” This is a clear representation of the mixture of practical and idealistic motivations that convinced black people to unify behind the Readjuster movement. Some of them at least partially viewed a path to

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\(^2\) Hillary Green, *Educational Reconstruction*, 80-83, 157-158, 162, 169, 187. Green argued that the Readjuster movement provided the right environment for black activists in the realm of education to obtain significant benefits in their public schools. She wrote that “starting in 1879, Readjusters funneled more state monies to cities, towns, and counties, to be used in the public schools,” and that, “William Mahone and other Readjusters made school funding a priority for the nascent party.”; See also Foner, *Reconstruction*, 554. The Republican party had removed a provision from the 1875 Civil rights Bill that funded public schools because it was too controversial; Moore, *Two Paths*, 89, 102; Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet*, 382, 377.
political “salvation” through the support of the Readjusters, which mirrored Mahone and the party's white leaders’ lofty language about their party. However, the party’s appointment of African American teachers to the public-school system over white teachers challenged traditional social relationships between white and black people in the state and contributed to growing resentment among white people in Virginia.93

Figure 8: “District School” The Readjusters, and new Movement Conservatives before them, argued that traditional Conservatives would sooner destroy any schools in Virginia than fund them. Here Conservative John Warwick Daniel is pictured putting the torch to a schoolhouse. He would eventually replace Mahone in the Senate as a Democrat in 1887. Woodstock Virginian August 26, 1881, Scrapbook 22, Box 213, WMP.

93 S.L. Tundas to William Cameron, July 29, 1881, Box 32, WMP; Tundas’s letter was one of several accounts from black men who wrote to Mahone about their enthusiasm with Readjuster policies. Turner was a black man who edited The People's Voice in North Carolina. He was so inspired by Readjusters in Virginia that he planned to give up his job and travel to Virginia to participate in the canvass there. Turner wrote that along with all “right thinking colored men of the country, I consider the cause which you and your noble compatriots have originated and partially maintained in Virginia, as that of the entire race throughout the length and breadth of our land… I hold myself at a moment’s notice from you to give up my position and enter the canvass in Virginia.” Turner to William Mahone, July 2, 1881, Box 32, WMP; In a newspaper clipping another black Republican wrote that the black man “will not excuse the folly of those who are attempting to mislead the uninformed and illiterate masses of our people in their nefarious designs to throttle the movement and onward march of the Readjusters…a party pledged and able to fulfill their promises for the amelioration of the condition of the people of Virginia.” Ibid., “An Echo From a Colored Rockingham Republican,” July 1-8 1881.
Racial Violence and the Collapse of the Readjusters

After Governor Cameron’s election in 1882, Virginia’s white Conservatives realized they could not beat the Readjusters on economic issues and a growing number of poor whites had proved to be strong Readjusters. Without any policies of their own to campaign on the Conservatives renamed themselves as the Virginia Democratic Party and, led by some of Mahone’s longtime antagonists such as Jubal Early, desperately attacked the Readjuster movement with the inflammatory charges of “negro rule” and “miscegenation” to unite white Virginians in defense of white supremacy and destroy Mahone’s movement. Modern scholarship has portrayed the resulting massacre of unarmed black men in Danville Virginia prior to the election of 1883 as proof that the Readjuster coalition was doomed from then on by implacable white supremacy in Virginia and that Mahone and the party’s leadership abandoned African American voters and gave up their designs on a Republican government in Virginia. There is nothing inherently wrong with this interpretation, but the violence perpetrated against Readjuster voters in the 1883 election was just the beginning of a pattern of violence and fraud against Mahone’s supporters, and splinter movements across the South generally, who were not discouraged after the election of 1883 and continued to fight on primarily under the Republican banner.94

For Americans in the nineteenth century, violence or the threat of violence was an established part of the political process. During Reconstruction, white people carried out various

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94 Degler, The Other South, 280. The Readjuster movement had drastically increased voter participation in politics thanks to the removal of the poll tax. 143,000 Virginians voted in 1879 and by 1883, this voter total reached 276,000. Moore, Two Paths, 114-118. Violence directed against black Readjusters in 1883 is evidence that no amount of political maneuvering by Mahone could dispel the fear that many white Virginians had when confronted with the prospect of racial integration, and white Democrats used this paranoia to go on the offensive in Virginia.
forms of mob and individualized violence against African Americans to defend white supremacy. As scholar Carole Emberton argues, such acts of violence “enabled Americans to define who they were as well as who they were not” as citizens and political actors. For traditional white Conservatives (now Democrats) they would not allow Mahone’s Readjusters to elevate black men and poor whites into a bloc that might overturn their hierarchical system of white supremacy. Democratic leaders reminded white men of supposed duty to their race and mixing violence with voting was a powerful tool because it spoke to martial tradition inherent in American society, with gun ownership in the South being in most instances the exclusive right of white men before the Civil War. Thus, in the lead up to the murders in Danville the Democrats equated any black voting to a race war and set out to redeem their manly honor that Mahone’s movement threatened.95

The Democrats realized a focus on the Readjusters’ perceived threat to white supremacy was their best tactic against Mahone in 1883. After the successful election of Governor Cameron, the Readjuster Party seemed invulnerable and Mahone gushed that “the outlook for the South is better and with a resolute and determined effort, on the part of those who would expel the nightmare of Bourbonism there is in reserve for her and every interest a bright and prosperous future.” He believed the party had substantial support across the state and that only the issue of racial integration could threaten their dominance. This view was expressed by Mahone’s

95 For the social and political implications of violence and its relationship to white supremacy see Carole Emberton, Beyond Redemption (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 8-10, 140-145; Michael Perman, “Counter Reconstruction: The Role of Violence in Southern Redemption,” in The Facts of Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of John Hope Franklin, eds. Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); and Bertram, Wyatt-Brown, Honor and Violence in the Old South, 104, 209-210. Bertram Wyatt Brown argues that violence was “the proper means for recovering lost honor” and a means for eliminating perceived threats to the established white supremacist hierarchy in the South.
mouthpiece the *Richmond Whig* that stated that the “only real issues in Virginia this year are the debt, the suffrage, and the schools and they [the Democrats] know there can be no other unless they can succeed in re-defining the color line.” The paper said that racial harmony “has already shown to be possible under the Readjuster banner” and this was all that was needed to keep the Democrats out of power. The *Whig’s* optimism belied the very real concern many Readjusters had over the growing white backlash against Readjuster policies, especially regarding black teachers replacing white ones in Virginia’s schools. As the election of 1883 approached, the Readjusters assured white Virginians that an increase in black teachers was not a step toward general school integration, “nothing could be further from the truth,” wrote one Readjuster organ. Tensions grew across the state as voters clearly identified a racial divide between each party’s policies heading into the pivotal election. One man wrote that “the Bourbons [Democrats] publicly say that they do not want the nigger vote” and “the colored vote will go with those who can and will aid them in local and personal affairs.” The Democrats’ strategy of making any future election a racial contest appeared to be gaining steam. William Mahone was concerned about these tactics, but he incorrectly assumed his political success and military legacy were enough to retain white support as Democrats stoked the fears of mixed schools and miscegenation.96

The Danville Massacre was Virginia’s first major incident of the kind of white supremacist violence against black men that had been seen far earlier in other southern states. The killings were called a riot by white Democrats to frame the incident as the potential spark of a race war and not the cold-blooded murder that it was. Three days before the November election

of 1883, a dispute between a white and black man resulted in a crowd of white men shooting four unarmed black men. This instigated countless armed posses of white men to roam around Virginia and intimidate voters prior to election day. Danville was a Readjuster stronghold, with a majority black population, and African Americans held posts in the town council, police force, and other offices. However, its white citizens in the surrounding county were strong Democrats and the Democratic Party worked feverishly to stir up familiar Reconstruction paranoia with dire warnings against the prospect of “negro rule” in Danville. Within days the Democrats’ propaganda spread far and wide and directly implicated the Readjuster Party in instigating the violence in Danville.97

The rhetoric of the reconstituted Virginia Democratic Party instigated the massacre at Danville as a retaliation against the Readjusters’ beneficial policies toward black Virginians. The white residents in Danville were whipped into a frenzy after Jubal Early helped publish the incendiary Danville Circular bulletin in October of 1883. This propaganda piece warned Danville’s white residents about the perceived “negro rule” the Readjusters represented in their town, and the subsequent murders these white Democrats committed in response severely

97 It should be no surprise that the Democrats’ charges of “negro rule” were devoid of any pretense in reality. Black men held four seats on the city council as opposed to the seven claimed by Jubal Early’s Danville Circular and the town only had two black policemen. Of the town officials, twenty-three were Democrats, fourteen were Readjusters, and two were independents. Thirty-nine were white and a mere eight were black men, despite Danville being a majority black city. Degler, *The Other South*, 294-295; Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet*, 402-403; Walter Calhoun, “The Danville Riot and its Repercussions on the Virginia Election of 1883” in *Studies in the History of the South: 1875-1922*, (Greenville: Dept of History, East Carolina College, 1966), 25-51; On the ways in which black people holding office challenged traditional conceptions of whiteness during the Readjuster years see Dailey, *Before Jim Crow*, 12-13; Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*,404-407; For an analysis of the paranoia and fear of white Americans in both the North and South during Reconstruction see Mark Wahlgren Summers, *A Dangerous Stir Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.)
damaged the confidence among black Readjusters, and William Mahone himself, that free and fair elections were possible. However, this violence did not sway Mahone and the party leadership from focusing on future elections, nor did it fundamentally sever the support of African Americans for Mahone and the Republicans, with twenty-three out of thirty-two black majority counties in Virginia voting the Republican ticket for Congress in 1884 and all but one of these counties voting Republican in 1886. Instead, the Democrats turned some whites away from Mahone with the race issue, but their ultimate success in regaining control of state government occurred over several years of continued violence, election fraud, and the assassination of Mahone’s reputation. Mahone’s long list of personal rivalries contributed to the downfall of the Republicans in Virginia. Nevertheless, Mahone remained the only figure capable of organizing any opposition to the Democrats in Virginia, and the Republicans’ failure to unify behind him in his bid for governor in 1889 assured his defeat. After this failure, Mahone continued to advocate for a fair election process in Virginia while the Democratic Party stamped out all remnants of third-party and Republican challenges to their control of Virginia.  

The killings in Danville in 1883 suppressed the black electorate significantly, and neither Mahone nor the Republicans controlled the needed force to ensure fair elections. After previous massacres during Reconstruction the presence of federal soldiers had sometimes resulted in federal investigations that protected black rights in government. This was not so in 1883. On a national scale, Republican interest in Reconstruction was essentially dead with the last congressional measure designed to protect black rights, the Civil Rights Act of 1875, struck down by the supreme court in 1884. Modern scholarship on this act argues that it was more a moral act than one that could be enforced, and this was even more true in 1883. In this context, it

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98 Warrock-Richardson Almanack (Richmond, Va., 1884), 32-37.
is little wonder the Democrats were emboldened to resort to violence to defeat the Readjusters, and the murder of unarmed black men in Danville fundamentally damaged the Readjusters’ ability to hold on to the white votes they needed to combat Democratic control. White violence against black people had previously shaken the Republican Party’s commitment to Reconstruction in the 1870s and created extensive internal divisions within the party, as many Republicans believed federal interference to protect the rights of Freedmen had gone too far and was not the government’s responsibility anymore. The Democrats capitalized on this apathy in 1883 to carry out the brutal murders in Danville and undermine the legitimacy of Virginia’s elections, with no fear of a state or national backlash or intervention.99

The Danville Massacre demonstrated that, for all his organizational talent, Mahone could not stand up to traditional Conservatives when they tapped into white Virginians’ fears over “negro domination” and miscegenation. These tactics used the trappings of southern honor and white supremacy to equate any black man getting a local job or voting at the polls to a broad and intolerable assault on Virginia’s collective white “family.” Longtime Conservative and Funder John Warwick Daniel bluntly stated the reconstituted Virginia Democratic Party’s position at a rally prior to the election of 1883: “I am Democrat…because I am a white man and a Virginian.” As historian Gregory Downs argues, these tactics connected any black success to white impoverishment in a racial zero-sum game where “an inequity to any white man was an insult to

99 Federal protection was seen in response to the “riots” in Memphis and New Orleans in 1866 where numerous black people were murdered by mobs of whites. See Foner, Reconstruction, 262-263, 274, 556. Eric Foner argues that these riots were responded to by the federal government for the benefit of black citizens. Foner showed that investigations into the violence in New Orleans “provided for the establishment of a new civil government in Louisiana, elected by blacks and loyal whites.” By the time of the Danville killings in 1883, the federal government was decidedly against further intervention on these issues in the former Confederate states; For the violence of white redeemers in Mississippi and Louisiana see process of see Nicholas, Lemann, Redemption the Last Battle of the Civil War (New York: Access and Diversity, Crane Library, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).
every white man.” Virginia Democrats’ use of this rhetoric eroded the support of whites in the
mountain counties of southwest Virginia who had little day-to-day interaction with black people.
Democratic propaganda directly targeted this group of whites, with one party pamphlet
proclaiming, “White men of the mountains! Many of you are not yet aware of the danger in
which you and your families stand of being ruled over by negroes.” Following the massacre,
Jubal Early offered his sympathies to the white citizens of Danville when he stated that, “We
heartily sympathize with our fellow citizens of Danville in their struggle against the domination
of the negro race, under the lead of renegade white men.” The Democrats’ actions demonstrated
the intractable nature of white supremacy in Virginia prior to the 1883 election, and, for all its
success, Mahone’s Readjuster coalition could not overcome this inherent racism. In the 1884
Congressional election, only six counties out of the fifteen that had voted for Governor Cameron
in 1881 and given the Readjusters at least five hundred white votes, went for the Republican
Party. With the debt settled, many white people were comfortable returning to the Conservative
ranks.100

100 For the Daniel quote see Moore, Two Paths to the New South, 116. Moore also calculated that the
Readjusters’ white support comprised at least 30,000 relatively loyal white men, 46; Downs, Declarations
of Dependence, 192-199. Down’s work focuses on North Carolina and demonstrates that the Democrats
focused solely on white supremacy in various southern states to fight back against any splinter
movements that formed.; “To The White Counties,” The Democratic Campaign, Oct 29, 1883,
Scrapbooks, Box 216; ibid., “The Infamy of Coalish”; Ibid., Early’s quote is from “Danville - The City
Overrun by Black and Tan,” Oct 25. The Democrats targeted governor Cameron on the issue of
miscegenation. In The Infamy of Coalish, Democrats reported that a drunk Governor Cameron had
brushed off concerns about miscegenation, and in The City Overrun the Democrats decried the alleged
“negro rule” that Mahone had instituted in Danville and called black Virginians “an infamous gang under
Billy Mahone’s command” and that “the blackguardism of negro men [in Danville] is politeness
compared to brutality of the black women, who flaunt their tawdry, cheap finery about the streets.”; For
Jubal Early’s quote see “Forewarned is Forearmed,” The National Republican, Nov 7, 1883, Scrapbooks
Box 216; For the election data on white counties see Warrock-Richardson Almanack (Richmond, Va.,
1880-1890), 32-37.
The Coalition Begins to Fracture: Republican Reactions to the Massacre

Readjusters and Republican papers fumed against the Democrats’ violence after Danville, but the Democrats realized neither Mahone nor the Republicans had an answer for their tactics. In the days between the killings and the election one northern traveler observed that “the county was most excited over rumors that the negroes were making a general uprising” and “the state was bordering on a condition of war.” Another from Philadelphia summarized how white men he talked to had decided to “shoot over the niggers and kill the white people who are leading them,” continuing, “If there is anything we are determined upon, it is that the educated whites shall rule Virginia, even if we have to shoot the life out of this Mahone movement.” While this story is essentially hearsay, the result of the subsequent election left little doubt many white people in Virginia believed the Democratic fear-mongering, especially whites in the southwest that supported the Readjusters on economic reforms but actively resented the imagined intrusion of black people into their towns and public spaces.¹⁰¹

Northern reactions to the massacre were mixed, but they demonstrated waning support for Mahone, that represented Mahone’s chief value to them had always been his credibility among white Virginians as a Confederate veteran. The violence in Danville thus proved to many Republicans that even Mahone might not be enough to resist the southern Democrats. One Virginia Republican had previously commented that “if we cannot divide the Democrats with Mahone that it is useless to try anymore,” and several articles that followed the Readjusters’ defeat in 1883 affirmed this sentiment. In one article titled Disgraced Virginia, the paper concluded that Virginia “is no home for a self-respecting white man of the North.” The National

Republican despaired over the situation in Virginia as a result of the violence in Danville and said that the Democratic policy in Virginia was a war “of brute force against freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press…the negro hater demands absolute obedience of others to his caprices. He tolerates no difference of opinion. Not to hate what he hates is to hate him.” While these papers all decried the racist attacks by the Democrats, they also seemed resigned to failure in Virginia with one article asking, “What is left of Mahone?” This sense of hopelessness among the Republicans contributed to growing criticism of Mahone himself and helped build the persona of “Mahone tyrannical boss” that has remained a central part of his legacy.102

Some Republicans blamed Mahone’s leadership for the Democrats’ victory after the Danville massacre. The Washington Times commented that the result in Virginia should show Republicans that “Too much Mahone drove from him thousands of the best Republicans of the state, who did not believe that the political destiny of any state in the Union should be committed to the keeping of one man.” However, other Republican papers in the North represented a unified front following the violence and argued that it was primarily the Democrats’ tactics and not Mahone's leadership style that was responsible for the crushing defeat of the Readjusters in 1883. The Boston Times said that the only thing the Democrats could do was to “shoot a few negroes and intimidate the rest” and that “Mahone is a hero…he deserves Northern confidence, sympathy, and aid.” A Philadelphia paper predicted Democratic tactics would backfire on them and said that Mahone was a champion for fighting against the “resistance to the negro’s constitutional rights of political equality.” Mahone and the Readjusters could not afford this

disunity of opinion among Republicans as they faced a united Democratic Party at the polls on election day who were determined to prevent further Readjuster victories at any cost. No matter what policies Mahone espoused he was unable to stop white Democrats from exercising tight control over most of Virginia's polling places from 1883 on.103

**Beginnings of Disenfranchisement: The Democrats Take Control Through Violence and Fraud**

Racist rhetoric about miscegenation and “negro rule” and the violence at Danville was not enough to assure the Democrats that Mahone would be defeated. During the election of 1883, various forms of election fraud were instituted by the Democrats to ensure the defeat of the Readjusters at the polls. The Democrats sent out armed men to the polls to prevent Readjusters both black and white from having their votes counted in large numbers. Many Readjusters, especially black men, refused to abandon Mahone, and the large quantity of aggrieved reports of fraud and violence at the polls that Mahone received demonstrates that there were white Readjusters too who were disgusted by the Democrats’ tactics. Nevertheless, there is no doubt the election of November 6, 1883, was a crushing defeat for the Readjuster Party in Virginia with the Democrats regaining complete control of both houses of the General Assembly. In the city of Danville, contemporary reports indicated that only 51 black people voted out of an electorate of 1,301, and voter turnout was affected in most other counties in the state. The impact might have been even more serious for the fragile alliance brokered with white voters in the state. “The incendiary talk of the negroes in the Danville district spread like wildfire…hundreds of white

men deserted Mahone and in some instances moderate negroes voted with Democrats,” reported one paper in the aftermath of the election.104

Democrats mixed intimidation and bribery at the polling places in a deadly combination that Mahone had no ability to stop. Democratic candidate and Confederate veteran Williams Carter Wickham had workers for his campaign at numerous polling places who bribed every voter who approached. A notary named J. L. Valentine described the use of alcohol to bribe voters writing, “I saw men taken into and behind a stable about thirty yards from the polls… by Wickham managers and when they returned, they showed that they were under the influence of liquor. A man told me he got a vote for Wickham for a drink of Brandy.” The Democrats employed bribery across all counties in Virginia and it had a decisive impact on the election’s outcome. As one Readjuster from Alexandria wrote, “we were beaten here by the free use of money, and traitorous cause of the Republican office holders at Falls-Church and Alexandria [sic]…In my district they only beat us by seven votes, this was a gain of about 33 votes for them which were bought.”105

The Readjusters had always obtained most of their strength from majority African American urban centers and a few majority white mountain counties, and the murder of black men at Danville devastated a major urban center of Readjuster support. Subsequently, the Democrats needed little help in the other Virginia counties to control the polling places. The Democrats relied on intimidation at nearly every polling place and they regularly outnumbered

104 Ibid., “Mr Dana and the Bourbons,” The National Republican, Nov 20, 1883; For a table of Readjuster voters in urban areas from 1879-1883 see Moore, Two Paths to the New South, 52. Moore has the black vote in Danville dropping from 841 in 1882 to just 26 in 1883.
105 J.L. Valentine to William Mahone, Nov 1883, Frauds: 1882-1888, Box 192, WMP; Ibid., William Pelham to William Mahone, November 25, 1883. Pelham was a member of “colored Readjuster coalition” from Hanover county and recounted how he was offered “a package of greenbacks to vote for General Wickham.”; (?) to William Mahone, Nov 25, 1883, Box 82, WMP.
the Readjuster officials there. In Hanover County, L. R. Burnett reported that “the Democrats were in force early in the morning; formed a cordon of self-constituted police around the porch, and if a man colored or white presented himself and desired to vote their way [he] was permitted to do so.” This report went on to describe how Democratic judges at the polling places outnumbered all Readjuster and Republican representatives and did the counting themselves, “there were during the day at all times during the day from ten to twenty Democrats in the room where the polls were.” These accounts made no mention of Readjuster officials at their polling places but many of them, especially black Readjusters expressed determination to vote anyway which caused the Democrats to increase their threats, as one Mahone man reported, “Men white and black were openly and persistently bulldozed and threatened with loss of patronage, loss of homes, and loss of employment.” In light of this, it is unsurprising that Democratic intimidation kept some Readjusters from coming out to vote at all. A post-election report from Readjuster W. E. Harvie stated that the Danville circular “had the effect of making many of our men who were either weak or timid vote with the Funders or remain away from the polls.”

Even before the Danville massacre many white people were too intimidated to vote for the Readjusters. “The white people of this section cannot be depended upon as Readjusters. Them that are in favor of it are afraid to vote,” wrote one Mahone man in 1882. In 1883, the Democrats doubled down on white reluctance and racial paranoia by declaring “war upon the negro” and “abandoning all discussion of state policy, the Democrats made the campaign exclusively [on] the race issue…half of their gains were won from the ranks of the white Readjusters by cajoling and threats,” reported one Readjuster. While the Readjusters recognized

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106 L.R. Burnett to William Mahone, Nov 13, 1883, Frauds 1882-1883, Box 192; Ibid., (?) to William Mahone, Dec 1-13, 1883; Ibid., W. E. Harvie to William Mahone, Dec 12, 1883.
the Democratic tactic of labeling themselves “white man's party,” they were unable to counteract the race war narrative the Democrats emphasized in the aftermath of Danville and, without another economic issue to attract poor white men to their standard, Mahone and his lieutenants were left shell-shocked as the election returns came in, ousting them from both Houses of the Virginia General Assembly.¹⁰⁷

The violence of the Democratic Party was the decisive factor in 1883, and they won by 18,000 votes out of 276,000. William Mahone was surprised and disgusted as the Democrats won two-thirds of the seats in Virginia’s legislature, but far from resigned to defeat. Mahone lamented how the Democrats won on the race issue because it “precludes the necessity of argument…prejudice is not amenable to reason or argument,” and he believed the Democrat’s blatant appeals to racial fear and paranoia had been fully exposed and would ultimately backfire on them. In two letters written in December, Mahone expressed optimism for future elections in Virginia: “Many of those who were deceived, deluded, bulldozed and [harassed] into support of the Bourbon ticket are becoming disgusted and returning to the camp” and “you will be glad to know that we are stronger here and before the country than ever.” Indeed, Mahone was determined to reorganize the party specifically to counteract the heavy-handed Democratic tactics. In February, Mahone wrote to Ross Hamilton, a leading African American politician, about this issue, saying, “Let me urge you to perfect the organization in your county by the election of at least one good man at each precinct who will accurately canvass and list every vote therein.” Additionally, Mahone’s influence concerning federal patronage was still routinely

¹⁰⁷ (?) to William Mahone, Nov 23, 1883, Box 82, WMP.
sought, and he encouraged his supporters to deliver Virginia from “the hands of the Philistines” at the next election so that he could reward them with wealthier positions in the state.  

Mahone had not lost hope, but the impact of the Democratic appeals to white racial prejudice and the violence at Danville on the future of the Readjuster-Republican coalition in Virginia cannot be understated. The race issue severely eroded the Readjusters’ white support, which left black Readjusters, who still attempted to vote for the party in large numbers in many places, with little hope of their votes being counted by the white Democratic election officials. In Halifax County the report of R.D. Mason described the intimidation at the polling place, noting that, “Several white Democrats had shotguns”, but he described how “the colored people all voted the Readjuster ticket, and the whites voted the Democratic ticket,” and that, “two of the judges were Democrats and I was the only Readjuster present, no persons were admitted to see the votes counted…[and] thirteen colored men who offered to vote the Readjuster ticket were rejected by the Democratic judges.” African Americans thus braved personal danger to vote the Readjuster ticket in 1883, demonstrating their belief in the movement. However, Mahone’s officials were in most cases unable to capitalize on this sentiment as Democrat forces at the ballot box were too strong. Peter Boyd was a Readjuster from Halifax but was unable to ensure a fair vote there. He confirmed Mason’s account and stated “each party received an equal number of votes, but the official returns give the Democrats forty-two majority—which I know is fraudulent. The colored people complained to me for allowing the ballot box to be taken away.”

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108 For these numbers see Degler, The Other South, 298; William Mahone to My Dear Sir, Dec 25, 1883, Vol 48:67, WMP; Ibid., William Mahone to My Dear Sir, Dec 22, 1883, 42; Ibid., William Mahone to My Dear Calo, Dec 24, 1883, 54; Ibid., William Mahone to Ross Hamilton, Feb 6, 1884, 373; Ibid., William Mahone to John Booker, Feb 11, 1884, 467.
These accounts demonstrated how effective Democrat tactics were in suppressing the Readjuster vote in the 1883 election.\footnote{R.D. Mason to William Mahone, Nov 16, 1883, Frauds: 1882-1883, Box 192, WMP. In Halifax, this resulted in a tie which was soon broken by Democratic stuffing of the ballot box. The total number of voters was 320, but the final count was 404 because of fraudulent extra ballots added by Democratic officials. When this discrepancy was noted, the Democratic judges removed votes until the number was back down to 320, thereby removing many legitimate Readjuster votes in the process; Hahn, \textit{A Nation Under our Feet}, 405. Hahn argues that black people resisted both bribery and intimidation to vote in 1883 and that they “helped provide the coalition with 13,000 more votes in 1883 than it had received in 1881; C. J. Simmons to William Mahone, “Report of Peter Boyd,” Nov 16, 1883, Frauds:1882-1883, Box 192, WMP; J.S. Burton to William Mahone, Jan 5, 1884, Box 82, WMP. There is evidence that some white men resented the Democrats and remained loyal to the Readjuster movement. In Halifax County, where the egregious example of ballot stuffing occurred, J. S. Burton wrote to Mahone and said “I will say as a white man of this county I stand by the Readjusters party as long as I live I donte think that the bourbon funders can do as muth as the Readjusters party have done.” The broken English of this letter to Mahone is indicative of the poor agrarian whites who were certainly a large part of his white supporters.}{109}

The Readjusters were defeated in 1883, but Mahone still believed he could carry on as a Republican. Having cooperated with northern Republicans in the past, Mahone officially reconstituted the Readjuster Party as Republican in April of 1884 to rescue his faltering coalition. However, his plan backfired when Democrat Grover Cleveland was elected president that fall, robbing Mahone of the federal patronage. As a consequence, many black Readjusters abandoned Mahone and many whites returned to the ranks of the Democratic Party. Of the thirty counties that gave the Readjusters a majority in every election between 1879-1883, only eighteen went for the Republicans in 1884 compared to twelve for the Democrats.\footnote{For these statistics see \textit{Warrock-Richardson Almanack} (Richmond, Va., 1880-1890), 32-37. For the Congressional vote total in 1886 see page forty.}{110} While black Virginians remained strong Republicans, and the Republicans won a majority of Virginia’s Congressional seats handily in 1886, Mahone’s own actions strained his relationship with his black supporters. Many black people had long desired their own candidates to be represented in Congressional nominations of the Readjuster Party, but in 1884, Mahone refused to support their nominee, Joseph P. Evans of Petersburg, instead supporting a staunch white supporter and Union...
veteran, James Dennis Brady. This action caused black people to question their support of Mahone. Without a national Republican regime to worry about, and with Mahone’s diverse coalition showing internal divisions, Virginia Democrats began the process of legalizing their fraudulent tactics from the 1883 election to ensure Mahone and the Republicans could never gain traction again. In 1884, a Democratic-controlled General Assembly passed the Anderson-McCormick Act, mandating that electoral officials, registrars, and judges be appointed by the General Assembly. This gave the Democrats nearly complete control over all polling places and the organization and conduct of all subsequent elections.

With a majority in national and state politics, the Democrats undercut Mahone’s legitimacy as a Confederate veteran when they nominated ex-Confederate Fitzhugh Lee (nephew of Robert E. Lee) for governor in 1885. Fitzhugh rode around Virginia with his late uncle’s saddle, backed by upwards of 1,000 horsemen and in full Confederate dress. Fitzhugh Lee’s subsequent election proved that armed white men still held sway over Virginia politics and sent a clear message that ex-Confederate Democrats like Fitzhugh Lee and Jubal Early were taking back the state from Mahone and his black Republican allies. Fitzhugh Lee defeated Readjuster

111 For Brady’s profession of loyalty to Mahone see James Dennis Brady to William Mahone June 8, 1882, Box 48, WMP; For the election results of 1884 concerning Joseph P. Evans see Election Returns, U.S. House Abstracts, 1884, Box 188, Library of Virginia, Richmond Va (hereafter cited as LOV); see also Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 408.
112 Degler, The Other South, 301; On the process of Disenfranchisement in Virginia and the McCormick Act see Brent Tarter, The Grandees of Government, 266; and Perman, The Struggle For Mastery, 195; For Virginia’s vote in the Presidential election of 1884 by county see Warrock-Richardson Almanack (Richmond, Va., 1884), 32-34; Democrats were exultant at their success in 1883. The Democratic organ The Lynchburg Virginian reported that Mahone was a traitor on the level of Benedict Arnold except he was “too much the shrimp” to be compared to that man. The paper continued, “politically dead, dammed and disgraced, little Billy Mahone has gone to join Benedict Arnold…crafty, hungry, pinched, tape-wormy, measelly [sic], this creature Mahone had no horizon or heaven except an office,” “Mahone” Nov 16, 1883, Scrapbooks, Box 216, WMP.
John S. Wise easily as a result of these tactics and because he had co-opted most of the Readjusters’ most popular stances on reconciliation with the North and Virginia’s debt. Thus, the election of 1885 demonstrated that it was not Mahone’s economic vision for Virginia that the Democrats despised so much as it was his Republican loyalties and the black men who supported him. In 1887, the Democrats replaced Mahone in the United States Senate with John Warwick Daniel, seemingly defeating Mahone for good.113

The Readjusters were the most successful challenge to the Democratic elites in the South, but they were not the only third-party movement. There was a trend of class-based resistance to the Democratic elite as indicated by similar movements in other southern states. In Texas, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Georgia poor whites often launched similar movements that allied with black men to varying degrees to attack the entrenched Democratic elites. However, all these movements lacked a versatile leader such as William Mahone with a Confederate and railroad pedigree that allowed him to appeal to the interests of both the common man and the rich politicians and businessmen. Additionally, Mahone’s earlier role in ratification of the Underwood Constitution moderated Virginia’s early course through Reconstruction and inadvertently this allowed the state’s debt issue to grow until the state was ripe for political change. The Readjusters thus served as a catalyst for other movements and for the Populist Party in the 1890s, but all these movements would struggle to make the radical concessions on racial

113 James L. Nichols, *Fitzhugh Lee: A Biography* (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, 1989), 125, 133. “The South is part and parcel of the Union today and means to do her part toward increasing prosperity and maintaining the peace of the Republic,” Lee stated.; Virginia’s voting returns for the 1885 gubernatorial race can be found in *Warrock-Richardson Almanack* (Richmond, Va., 1885), 28-29. Fitzhugh Lee won with 152,544 votes to John Wise’s 136,510.
and political issues that Mahone made in Virginia and all would be absorbed back into the Democratic fold by 1900.\textsuperscript{114}

Figure 1: “Mahone’s Free Ballot and Fair Count.” This piece of Democratic propaganda published in the lead up to the election of 1883. The Democrats charged that Mahone’s politics would result in a state of “negro rule” in Virginia despite Mahone’s assurance that the Readjusters had no desire to promote full racial equality. Here Mahone brandishes a musket and rides a mule called “coalish,” referring to the Readjuster and Republican fusion, while his supporters mob a polling place. The black men who follow him hold a razor, and the hand of a young white girl respectively, a clear message to white Virginians of violence and negro rule. \textit{The Democratic Campaign}, Oct 29, 1883, Scrapbooks, Box 216, WMP.

Figure 10: “No More Negro Rule!” This is a broadside from another Democratic paper that celebrated the killings in Danville and the Readjusters’ subsequent defeat. (ibid., Box 216)

\textsuperscript{114} For a brief summary of other southern splinter movements concurrent with the Readjusters see Degler, \textit{The Other South}, 289-291; For a comparison with movements in North Carolina see Gregory Downs, \textit{Declarations of Dependence} and Eric Anderson, \textit{Race and Politics in North Carolina 1872-1901: The Black Second}. 
Figure 11: “The Old Fox Nailed up at Last.” A satirized version of Virginia’s governor Fitzhugh Lee and William Mahone in 1885. Fitzhugh Lee’s election to Governor in 1885 was another major blow to the Readjusters and Republicans in Virginia. Lee campaigned on the legacy of his uncle Robert E. Lee and his election represented how successful the Democratic appeal of white supremacy had been in recent years. Here Lee, and the Democrats, have finally nailed up the wily fox William Mahone. Puck, Nov 11, 1885 Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, reproduction number LC-DIG-ppmsca-28142

Figure 12: Barbour: “Checkmate! The Whites Win!” Mahone: “The Devil! I thought the black bishop was good!” This Democratic propaganda published after the Readjusters’ defeat in 1883 shows prominent Democrat, Johnston Barbour, saving Virginia from William Mahone and the black people that support him. Mahone is pictured here as the devil due to his alliance with black people and as a master manipulator as he controls the black voters like the pieces on a political chessboard. This cartoon encapsulates the two main Democrat attacks against Mahone. The Democratic Campaign, Scrapbooks, Box 216, WMP.
“Mahoneism” and the End of the Republican Party in Virginia

Figure: 13 “The Last Junket.” After Mahone’s coalition fractured in Virginia in 1884, an unidentified newspaper clipping mocked President Chester A. Arthur’s defeat to Democrat Grover Cleveland. In the image, the president desperately tries to shed William Mahone and the racial strife the Readjusters have awakened (represented by the black goat) in Virginia, which was apparently weighing down the hot air balloon of the Republican national party. ( Scrapbook 31:31, Box 216, WMP)

William Mahone was the only man capable of uniting a coalition against the Virginia Democrats, but his authoritarian leadership style made him an easy scapegoat for white and black Republicans following the loss of his Senate seat and his failed campaign for governor in 1889. Many Republicans blamed their reversal of fortune in Virginia on "Mahoneism,” a term that portrayed Mahone as an almost comic villain regarding his leadership of the Readjuster and Republican Party in Virginia. Key Republicans refusal to support Mahone in 1889 essentially doomed his bid for governor in that year. After this campaign, and as the 1890s brought total Democratic control over Virginia's government, it was easy for many white Republicans to
accept the white supremacist view of Mahone as a tyrannical politician who unleashed
“dangerous” forces of black suffrage upon the state as the reason for their downfall, and this
became the accepted view of Mahone for decades to come among white Virginians.

Additionally, Mahone’s determination to only run candidates he personally favored alienated
many white and black supporters. Once Mahone lost his final bid for governor in 1889, the
benefits the Readjusters had supplied for black people were largely erased by the Democrats, and
Mahone's failures, especially his failure to support prominent black politician and former
Readjuster president of the Normal Collegiate Institute John Mercer Langston for the House of
Representatives in 1888, relegated William Mahone to a political figurehead for the remainder of
his life. Mahone’s feud with Langston highlighted Mahone's own inherent prejudice that was
reinforced by his defeat at the hands of the Democrats, and it showed that the biracial Readjuster
coalition was always based on the shaky ground of a give and take relationship between Mahone
and black Virginians.

Mahone's bossism in the Readjusters’ early days was one of the most important reasons
the party accomplished what it did. To organize his constituency Mahone utilized “quasi-military
methods” that mobilized his men to the polls on election day, which was typical of Republican
practices throughout the South during Reconstruction. During his career in politics, Mahone did
not tolerate other Readjusters or Republicans trying to set party policy over him. During the 1881
nomination of Cameron, Mahone sharply rebuked Readjuster Cabell Rives for questioning his
methods. Mahone told Rives that he did not “recognize your right or tolerate your impertinent
and indelicate attempt to measure my loyalty, to a party nomination, by mere conformity, to
either your will or your judgement.” He wrote harshly to fellow Readjuster Samuel Yates
Gilliam about the poor organization in his county: “Will you please inform me why it is we
cannot get an organized committee in your county. None is reported...we shall be powerless to
help you.” These tactics and thinly veiled threats did not endear Mahone to some supporters, but
as one paper at the time observed this bossism could be interpreted positively as Mahone being a
“fighter” against traditionalism in Virginia and that such a disposition was required to “hold the
masses” together.115 Mahoneism was never a prominent reason for the Readjusters collapse,
rather it contributed to dividing the diverse interests of Mahone, Republicans, and black people
that made up the Readjuster-Republican coalition. Each of these groups had incompatible
priorities once the state debt was resolved. Faced with resurgent Democratic opposition, Mahone
became an easy target for the ailing Republican Party in Virginia.

Mahone had always played a balancing game between his black constituents and
Virginia’s white Conservatives during the Readjuster years because he recognized that both were
needed for the third-party to have success. Mahone’s failure to back Joseph P. Evans in 1884 had
been the first instance of his ignoring the wishes of black leaders, and in 1888 John Mercer
Langston provided yet another example. Most black people never harbored any illusions that
Mahone had their best interests foremost in his mind, but they recognized Mahone’s willingness
to provide them with job opportunities that other white politicians would not. In 1882, one letter
to Mahone requested a black speaker for Leesburg County and articulated the fine line Mahone
walked as party leader, stating that “the negroes say Mahone has had several Republicans turned
out of office and invariably replaced by his Democratic followers…this makes further

115 William Mahone to Cabell Rives, Oct 3, 1882, Vol 32, WMP; William Mahone to Samuel Yates
Gilliam, Sept 19, 1882, Gilliam Family Papers, Box 4, UVA; “Virginia Politics,” Nov 2, 1883 Nelson
Newspaper, Scrapbooks, Box 219, WMP; For a positive appraisal of Mahone’s role as a party organizer
see Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 379; Moore, Two Paths, 107-108. On the portrayal of Mahone as a
corrupt boss Moore concludes this was almost entirely a Democratic fabrication and that their attacks on
Mahone “amounted to little more than myth-making exercises.”
Democratic appointments very dangerous if not fatal.” African Americans were concerned over their representation in the Readjuster Party, but the success of the party prior to 1883 likely eased their acceptance of Mahone’s control of party nominations. Mahone’s prejudice was of course a major reason for his failure to support Langston, but he also knew black candidates had little chance of being elected outside of counties with black majorities. His repeated election defeats due to the Democrats’ effective race baiting convinced Mahone that getting black men elected was an impossibility and running them at all was dangerous. In response, Langston refused to accept Mahone's attempt to undermine his candidacy, demonstrating that African Americans were prepared to challenge Mahone's leadership of the party.116

The growing success of Langston's campaign threatened Mahone's remaining control over Republican politics in Virginia and, doubly problematic for Mahone, Langston was a black man and essentially the first black man to directly challenge Mahone's decision-making as leader of the Virginia Republicans. Langston had been a loyal supporter of the Readjusters and served as president of the Normal Collegiate Institute funded by them. In the fractious Republican ranks of 1888, Langston decided Mahone was an impediment to black candidates and decided to run for Congress with $15,000 dollars of his own money. The level of support Langston had worried Mahone and his supporters. One of these men wrote to Mahone and described how Langston's success “enthused his friends, while his opponents are thrown in confusion and disorganization. I desire to know something that I may give to my friends without the use of your name.”

116 (?) to William Mahone, September 1882, Box 34 WMP; See also Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 377;
Langston's campaign directly targeted Mahone and alleged that he had remarked “no nigger blood will stain a seat in Congress.”

While there was no proof of this heated charge in Mahone’s papers, Mahone’s feud with Langston, combined with his earlier refusal to support Joseph Evans, demonstrated that he did not believe black men were fit for national office on principle, causing black supporters to break from him. At the state Republican convention, Mahone’s men were successful in undermining Langston’s candidacy by pretending to support him in the early stages before ultimately withdrawing their support, despite recognizing that this risked driving black men from the party. One of Mahone’s men wrote to him, stating, “our friends must not, absolutely must not give us away. Such action at this time would encourage the Langston negroes and so humiliate the white Republicans…that there would be great danger of silencing or driving away from us many white men.” Mahone thought he could win elections without Langston and was concerned that any black candidate would undermine his own chances for success and his lieutenants supported this view. One wrote Mahone, “our party cannot carry Langston. We cannot stand him and it’s no use denying it,” and another reported that “after a talk with the local colored leader of the county…I am satisfied the county can be carried against Langston for Congress.” Mahone was still the leader of the Republican Party in Virginia, but years of defeat at the hands of the Democrats, combined with his own goals and prejudice, fractured the Virginia Republicans in 1889.

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118 (?) to William Mahone Sept 7, 1888, Box 120 WMP; A. Jamison to William Mahone, May 25, 1888, Box 119 WMP; O.L. Hardy to William Mahone, Sept 3, 1888, Box 120 WMP; See also Jane Dailey, Before Jim Crow, 159.
Mahone’s Readjuster Party extended more privileges to black Virginians than any other political party in Virginia during the 1880s, and Mahone believed black people were a part of Virginia society and entitled to the vote to a degree most of his contemporaries were uncomfortable with. The Democrats’ racial violence perhaps moved him even further on this issue. Mahone stated that, “the saddest feature of this reign of terror is the sufferings [sic] it has inflicted upon the negroes here...when they act on their rights voluntarily accorded to them, they are shot down like dogs for party purposes by the beneficiaries of their toil for centuries.” Despite this remarkable statement, Mahone was still a white Virginian of his time with paternalistic racial views, his sympathy for black people likely derived from his Lost Cause belief that they had been loyal to the white South during the Civil War and since. Analyses that suggest Mahone experienced a personal evolution of his views of African Americans approaching social equality are overgenerous appraisals of his legacy.\(^\text{119}\)

Black people supported Mahone initially because the Republican Party had failed to deliver on its promises in Virginia, but Mahone’s refusal to support Langston drove away many of his supporters. A black Republican, John McHenry, recounted his fury upon reading an interview in which Mahone stated that, “the negro is a heavy load for the Republicans to carry.” McHenry replied, “now he [Mahone] shows that he is one of those politicians that the negro is

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\(^{119}\) See Degler, *The Other South*, 307-308; Brent Tarter, *The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 245-252. Tarter provides an accurate analysis of the rhetoric of Mahone and Governor Cameron that was markedly ahead of most white Virginians of their time, and he is right in arguing that Mahone clearly advocated different policies as a Conservative in the 1870s than he did as a Readjuster and Republican in the 1880s, as this thesis has demonstrated. However, I disagree with his portrayal of Mahone as having had an awakening on the racial issue from the time he commanded the troops who executed black POWs at the Battle of the Crater to his political career in the 1880s. While Mahone believed black men should vote, and his policies genuinely benefited their communities, he never advocated for more than suffrage and an occasional office posting for black men, so Tarter's assertion that “Mahone's personal attitudes toward African Americans evolved to match his increasingly egalitarian political stance,” is unsubstantiated by the evidence.
only fit to vote to keep such as him in office. The negroes aren’t tied to any one party. They are thinking for themselves and don’t propose to be run over.” McHenry concluded by saying that “I see, now, that he was afraid of Langston, who is a long ways better man, and greater too, than Mahone.” McHenry expressed betrayal toward Mahone and charged him with drawing the color line in politics like the Democrats did. Langston’s campaign emphasized the hypocrisy of Mahone's decision making, stating, “enemies of Mr Langston have charged him with attempting to draw the colored line…they are really persistently maintaining a color line long ago established. Which is expressed in the decision that no colored man must be nominated.” The fallout from Mahone’s refusal to support Langston resulted in six out of seven black majority counties voting for him as an independent where he was on the ballot. In a close race marked by the usual fraud and bribery, it is difficult to tell the precise effect of Mahone’s refusal to back Langston in 1888, but it clearly divided black people who had previously been strong Readjusters, as evidenced by the results of the state elections of 1889.120

Defections of Mahone’s longtime allies John S. Wise, former governor Cameron, and Union veteran Col. James Dennis Brady added to the challenges Mahone faced from all sides to

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120 “McHenry is Mad: The Well-Known Negro Politician is Down on Mahone,” Scrapbook 39:6, Box 221, WMP. An interesting note was written in the margin accompanying this piece dated January 22, 1889. The unsigned note was to Mahone and said that McHenry's column “shows that the Republican party is a gang of niggers - Return to your own party general - Confed [sic] Democrat.” This demonstrates that Virginia conservatives appealed to Mahone on the basis of his Confederate ties to renounce the Republicans. However, it is unlikely that even Mahone could have switched back his allegiance by this point; “The Political Situation in this District,” Aug 2, 1888, Scrapbook 37:39, Box 217, WMP; Additionally, Langston followed Mahone’s example by issuing strict instructions to his voters to fight against election day intimidation: “Do not! I urge you, leave the polls for any purpose whatever unless you leave in your absence, a reliable, intelligent friend who can read and write.” Ibid., Scrapbook 38:34; For the voting returns by county for the 1888 Congressional election see Warrock Richardson-Almanack (Richmond, Va., 1880-1890), 35-40; Langston ultimately won his seat after he brought his case to Congress and proved that fraudulent practices had defeated him; For returns from Langston’s election see Election Returns, U.S. House Abstracts, 1888, Box 18, LOV.
his control of the Virginia Republicans, and his own desire for power contributed to the party’s dismal prospects in 1888. These men became disillusioned with Mahone’s leadership after the defeats of 1883 and 1885, and they believed his long stay at the head of the party would doom them to failure in 1889. As John Wise stated, “so long as Mahone holds a prominent place in the party management, we will have a small chance to win for the reason that thousands of people will not vote for anything that Mahone is connected with…the only way Mahone will bury the hatchet is in the heads of everyone who opposes him.” John Wise resented Mahone’s domineering method of control, but he generally agreed with him on the status of black people in the party. However, other Republicans labeled Mahone as a hypocrite on the racial issue. The Republican Congressional Campaign Committee called Mahone’s support of the colored vote fraudulent, stating, “Mahone poses before the country as the great protector of the negroes…when, in fact, he has never been able to guard the colored man at the polls in his own ward of Petersburg; but this claim is a mere pretense to gain sympathy at the North.” Mahone clearly contributed to the fracturing of the Readjuster-Republican coalition, but without the Democrats’ violent reprisals and election tactics it is unlikely this would have mattered. Even a man as resourceful as Mahone had little hope of maintaining a viable coalition out of the Readjusters’ and Republicans’ varying factions in the face of the Democrats’ violence.121

121 “Wise Vs Mahone,” Richmond Dispatch, Aug 18, 1888, Scrapbook 37:33, Box 217; “Headquarters Republican Congressional Campaign Committee,” Oct 8, 1888, Scrapbook 38:35; See also Jane Dailey, Before Jim Crow, 138. John Wise had told his audience in the black majority city of Petersburg that there was “not too much nigger in the Readjuster Party”; Other related letters in the Mahone papers are William C. Elam to William Mahone June 8: 1888, Box 119, WMP. Mahone’s longtime friend Elam told him that Wise and other Republicans were not so much interested in defeating the Democrats “as in defeating you.”; and “Virginia’s Republican Majority,” The State Republican, Dec 1, 1887, Scrapbook 36:56. Wise discussed Mahone with a fellow Republican and pleaded that “you must help me save our party from him.”; J. L. Hamilton to William Mahone, July 23, 1888, Box 119, WMP. The split between Wise and Mahone culminated with a second Republican ticket proposed by the Wise faction. Hamilton was a Mahone supporter and stated that Wise’s defection was considered “a farce, and decent men will have no
more of it. Mr. Wise and his associates have, by their latest action, committed a breach for which nothing can atone except unconditional surrender.”
Racial Pragmatism and Mahone’s Last Campaign

Mahone’s biographer stated that William Mahone had essentially given up on politics in Virginia prior to his final bid for governor in 1889 and that it was thrust upon him by the party. However, Mahone’s own letters and correspondence tell a different story about the election of 1889: Mahone ran for governor in spite of a phalanx of African American and white Republicans who joined the Democrats in opposition against him, and Mahone was determined to win. Mahone recognized that becoming governor gave him his only chance to remain a player in Virginia politics now that the Republican Party was divided against him. Additionally, his correspondence shows that much of the antipathy he expressed toward his black supporters came from his belief that no black candidate could be elected in Virginia, and that popular black candidates like Langston threatened his control over Virginia’s Republican apparatus. Mahone carried out the canvass for his 1889 gubernatorial bid with the fervor of earlier elections, and this election underscored the complexities inherent in the Readjuster movement from the beginning.

Unfortunately for Mahone, both his white and black support base from the Readjuster years was hopelessly divided in 1889. The General Assembly elections that year showed that while some African Americans voted Republican, and thus likely would have supported Mahone for governor, many more deserted him. Additionally, white voters continued to abandon the Republicans, with only three white majority counties out of nineteen that had voted the Readjuster ticket in 1880 voting Republican in 1889. Mahone’s failure to become governor in 1889 closed what was arguably the most remarkable postwar career of any former Confederate

122 Both Nelson Blake and Carl N. Degler argued that Mahone was resigned to defeat by this point, even if he tried hard to win in 1889. I do not think this holds up with Mahone’s character, even if he was no doubt discouraged by his eroding support by this point. Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, 250; Degler, The Other South, 305.
general. And it also marked the last remnant of Republican control in Virginia until after the Civil Rights movement.\textsuperscript{123}

In the canvass for the 1889 gubernatorial contest, Mahone determined that the nomination of black candidates was an unacceptable risk. This was in stark contrast to the concessions he granted some black Readjusters during the movement's rise. As James Tice Moore has demonstrated, Mahone “demanded the inclusion of blacks in local party leadership” and said to an aide, “My judgement is, it would be politic to nominate a colored man- we certainly couldn't afford to defeat the nomination of a colored man. They are claiming it, and honestly, they ought to be allowed it. It would help us with the vote…all over the state.” By 1889, this was no longer true. Repeated experiences with Democratic violence convinced Mahone that white men would not support black candidates. In his letters about the canvass for 1889, he expressed no confidence toward African American candidates. “As you must realize of all times this is the last when we ought to nominate colored men,” wrote Mahone, “we want to deprive the Democrats of any excuse for stuffing ballot boxes, and by the nomination of courageous and reputable white men refute their cry of negro domination. In this county it is important that we nominate a white man. We can win with him, but we cannot elect a colored man. The nomination of a colored man would mean failure.” Mahone was now of the opinion that the effectiveness of white supremacist campaigning by the Democrats had totally

\textsuperscript{123} For the dismal returns from erstwhile white Readjuster counties in 1889 see Warrock-Richardson Almanack (Richmond, Va., 1880-1890), 30-31. Of the thirty counties that had supported the Readjuster Party in all four elections between 1879 and 1883 only fourteen voted Republican in the 1889 election. Down from twenty-five for President in 1888.
undermined the Republicans across the state and he was determined to use black men only in counties where he knew they could give him the advantage.124

While Mahone personally preferred to nominate loyal white men, he knew he still needed black Republican supporters, and he accomplished this by returning to the enticing promise of patronage he would control as governor. Mahone believed that the patronage he could provide as governor of Virginia was still an effective way to retain African American support regardless of his recent statements on Langston. He assured several black Republicans that the federal patronage of the Readjuster years would flow freely once he was elected. “I shall not be slow to recognize those who are reported to me as having performed signal service in the cause of the Republican Party,” Mahone said. He reminded other supporters of his past control over appointments to the Norfolk naval yard and said that “the officer in command of the yard is not friendly to us…however, it will not be very long before the way is opened for the employment of our people at the yard—certainly after the election.” Mahone also nominated one of Langston’s supporters, a black man named D.F. Batts, to canvass a county because “he was one of Langston’s right-hand men in this district last fall…[and he] will be invaluable in getting the colored forces in line and organized.” These actions proved ineffective. Of the twenty-eight black majority counties that had voted the Republican ticket for president in 1888, twelve returned Democratic majorities in the elections for the state legislature in 1889. While Democratic fraud in this election was rampant, these returns suggest a significant decrease in

124 Moore, Two Paths, 183. William Mahone to Gen. Dudley, September 16, 1889, Vol 89:307, WMP; Mahone utilized black canvassers only in counties with an African American majority and never in white dominant counties in 1889. In reference to one black man’s offer to canvass for Mahone for a fee, Mahone said, “In respect to the charcoal speaker, I do not see how we can utilize him. And then his figures are out of the question.” In another letter about black men canvassing in white majority counties, he commented “it does us more harm than good,” ibid., William Mahone to W.W. Dudley, Sept 13, 1889, 160; ibid., William Mahone to F.L. Taylor, Sept 17, 1889, 295; For additional letters from Mahone on these issues see Mahone to Dudley, Taylor, and Treat see, Vol 89:245, 247, 293-294.
black people’s willingness to back the Republicans in 1889. This decrease, combined with the Democrats’ tactics, doomed any slim chance Mahone had in 1889.125

Mahone’s refusal to support Langston likely drove many black voters from him, but the Democrats’ fraud and intimidation was still the crucial factor for his defeat in 1889. Mahone instituted measures to protect polling places in the 1889 election, but he was unable to prevent the Democrat election officials from fixing multiple precincts in their favor. The election reports to Mahone give the impression that these tactics were even more effective than they had been in 1883. A Mr. Cyrus wrote to Mahone and reported that on election day “every Democrat was worked up to a white heat by the Democratic press, speakers and Committe [sic] It is reported that they were all armed on the day of the election.” Any voter who was not dissuaded by character attacks against Mahone had to contend with the Democrats’ favorite strategies of bribery, ballot box stuffing, and violence. The Republican chairman from Powhatan county stated that “intimidation was practiced in every [form]…Republicans were told if they voted for Gen Mahone they would lose their home and place of work. Old bills were demanded of some voters in order to keep them from voting for Mahone,” and another chairman recounted how he was “set upon by a mob of drunken Democrats some twenty of them made the attack upon us…I was knocked down several times and severely cut.” Accounts of polling place fraud and bribery were even more explicit in 1889. George Bean had tried to vote the Republican ticket but recalled that “all of the judges and clerks are Democrats,” and that, “no Republican tickets were there…[someone] made away with them.” Bribery was summed up by J.L. Gleavis in his

125 William Mahone to A. S. Owen, Sept 17, 1889, Vol 89:286, 1889; ibid., William Mahone to Thomas L. Collins, Sept 17, 1889, 287: For 1888 presidential and 1889 state legislature election returns see Warrock-Almanack (Richmond, Va., 1880-1890), 30-37. This divided the black majority counties nearly evenly, with sixteen going to the Democrats and fifteen for the Republicans, not a good omen for Mahone.
statement that said: “we were defeated here by having to buy our own men, those who had always voted the Republican ticket were for sale to the highest bidder…it would have taken the national treasury to save this district.” Gleavis reported that the Democrats spent nearly $6,000 in his county. Even if this was an exaggerated example, it shows the willingness of the Virginia Democrats to buy voters off Mahone no matter the cost.¹²⁶

Despite the Democrats’ aggression, key white Republicans’ defections from Mahone, and Mahone’s own statements against Langston and black Republicans, African Americans continued to turn out for Mahone and the Republicans in 1889, even if their support was lower than it had once been. One Republican official reported that Democrats “told the colored people [that] if they voted they would not give them any work.” However, he went on to say that “notwithstanding a good many of the Republicans voted the Republican ticket…I think some Dems vote the Republican ticket that did not make it known,” and a Paul Dunnarant of Petersburg wrote that “every true Republican is doing his duty today the Bourbons are badly frightened.” Nevertheless, the Democrats were far more successful in suppressing the black and white vote in 1889 than they had been previously. This was evidenced by the report of R.A. Hamlet, an African American Readjuster from Campbell County, describing how many people were afraid to vote for Mahone and one man who did was “very secret about it.” A prominent and influential Republican told Hamlet that “he did not feel like riding eleven miles to the polls and then have his vote counted contrary to the way he gave it.” Without a unified Republican

¹²⁶ J.H.A. Cyrus to William Mahone, Dec 10, 1889, Folder 1; J.B. Wren to William Mahone, Nov 1889, Folder 1; L. Pritchard to William Mahone, Nov 6, 1889, Folder 3; George M. Bean to William Mahone, Nov 7, 1889, Folder 1; G.L. Gleavis to William Mahone, Nov 8, 1889, Folder 2, All in Box 193, WMP. See also J. E. Beard to William Mahone, Nov 20, 1889, One Republican voter recounted how Democrats had stood outside the polling places and told anyone who would listen that “Mahone was an infidel and scoffed at the Christian religion… [and that] some of our Republican brethren drew the line at the infidel charge and no amount of persuasion could [entice] them to vote.”
Party behind Mahone, there was little chance he could secure enough African American votes to come close to a victory in 1889.127

Virginia Republican leaders had become so divided prior to 1889 over their personal vendettas against Mahone that they squandered any remaining clout Mahone had left among Virginians both black and white. Mahone's desire to cling to power created animosity among other longtime allies; for instance, after years of supporting Mahone and being elected to Congress with his help, James Brady turned against him in 1889, evidently over disagreement with Mahone's leadership of the party, which Mahone took as a grave personal insult. Mahone later wrote to his former running mate, Senator Sherman, claiming that in 1889 Brady had promoted "the election of Democratic candidates by putting up bogus Republican candidates in the districts where Republicans ought to sway," and he also described Brady's support for a black candidate for deputy collector as "trying to incite the colored people to the nomination of a colored man, knowing that that means defeat." Seeing as Brady himself had been elected to Congress in 1884 over the black candidate Joseph P. Evans, Mahone was likely correct that Brady's opposition was a personal matter, unrelated to Mahone's treatment of Langston. What is known is that many Republicans were prepared to tolerate a Democratic regime if it meant Mahone's defeat. A Republican paper, The Valley Virginian, stated it would prefer "temporary defeat" to another tenure of Mahone and called the election of 1889 a "fight to the death. Virginia will either come out of the struggle a free state or a political machine…held in the grasp of Mahone." Mahone's style of leadership was abrasive, but both sides' refusal to bury the hatchet ensured they remained disillusioned and divided during the 1889 election, and this left

127 M.C. Althen to William Mahone, Nov 1889, Folder 1; Paul Dunnarant to William Mahone, Nov 6, 1889, Folder 3; R.A. Hamlet to William Mahone, Nov 1889, Folder 5, Box 193, WMP.
them impotent against a Democratic Party united in its desire to defeat the Mahone-Republican machine in Virginia.\(^{128}\)

Mahone’s defeat in the 1889 election was the last significant barrier to white democratic control of the state, and his friends and supporters expressed their dismay at the prospect of a Virginia controlled by the Democrats. One reverend wrote to Mahone and stated that Democrats were celebrating the “death” of Mahone but that “I would prefer to be dead with Mahone than alive with such a mob, as the so-called Democracy of Virginia has shown itself to be.” Editor of Mahone’s *Richmond Whig* and Confederate veteran William Elam wrote to Mahone and tried to cheer him up with a “we’ll beat ‘em yet,” before he blamed the fraudulent tactics of the Democrats for their defeat. “Tuesday seems to have been a bad day for Republicans,” Elam said, “without regard to section, race, color, or previous condition…we exhausted our means in holding our colored forces, so insidious and tempting was Democratic ‘persuasion.’” Mahone’s defeat also robbed Virginia of “thousands, yes millions of dollars in capital,” according to one Republican, from northern markets. Republicans thus wrung their hands and blamed the Democrats for Mahone’s defeat in 1889. His loss was evidence that the Party had never gained

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\(^{128}\) William Mahone to (?), Feb 26, 1890 Vol 91:698-706, WMP; William Mahone to W.W. Dudley, Sept 16, 1889 Vol 89:308, WMP; “Not For Mahone,” *The Valley Virginian*; Scrapbook 39:4, Box 219; For Democratic attacks against Mahone on the same issues see “The Last Appeal,” Oct 30, 1889, Scrapbook 41, Box 221. In this pamphlet, they described their platform as one of “self-preservation” against the “tyrant of Petersburg.” They also distributed pamphlets to black men which stated: “Mahone will support a Democrat for Congress against Langston because he is a negro” and asked if Virginia's colored people would support Mahone or Langston; R.A. Hamlet to (?), July 9, 1889, Papers of R.A. Hamlet, UVA. As black Republican R. A. Hamlet wrote to a friend, “I am afraid the outlook in Virginia is not very encouraging for the Republicans. It is too bad that they should be so divided. United they would certainly carry the state.”
significant support among white men to maintain a viable coalition, especially in the context of Republican disunity.\textsuperscript{129}

After his defeat, Mahone outwardly claimed he had no desire to be governor, despite having waged an aggressive campaign. In a letter to Longstreet, Mahone expressed his frustration over how the Republican Party had allegedly abandoned “Confederate Republicans,” like himself and James Longstreet. Mahone stated that he had never really wanted the role of Governor but was forced to run. “It was not my judgement that any contest should have been made in Virginia except that it may have been necessary to fortify our organization for 92…I did not want the nomination, but the men [on] whom we had to rely for Republican work and power would hear to nothing else.” However, Mahone had chosen to run in 1889 against the protestations of many Republicans, so his letter to Longstreet here is clear revisionism in an attempt to absolve himself from responsibility for Republican defeat. Virginia’s Republicans had achieved great success with Mahone, but he would ultimately helm their downfall as well.\textsuperscript{130}

The aftershocks of William Mahone’s political action in Virginia carried into the 1890s. In the beginning of that decade, a growing populist movement across the South formed out of many of the disgruntled agrarian white and black populations who had supported earlier splinter movements like the Readjusters in numerous southern states. Many of the Populists were impoverished white farmers who sought economic reforms and to a lesser extent black people who sought free and fair elections. These groups formed a national Populist Party that succeeded in briefly toppling Democratic governments in some southern states. The Populists received their

\textsuperscript{129} B.Z. Caffra to William Mahone, Nov 8, 1889; William C. Elam to William Mahone, Nov 8, 1889; L. Pritchard to William Mahone, Nov 6, 1889, All in Folder 2, Box 193, WMP.
\textsuperscript{130} William Mahone to James Longstreet, Dec 30, 1889, Vol 91:164, WMP.
impetus from Republican supporters and the legacies of third-party movements such as the Readjusters, and William Mahone even refrained from nominating a Republican candidate for governor in 1893 to support the Populists. In 1894, Mahone supported implementation of the Australian secret ballot to combat the Democrats’ passage of the Walton Act, which had complicated ballot marking procedures to confuse illiterate voters. Previously in 1890, he wrote that if the new laws made it difficult for African Americans to vote that “there is little to hope for in the way of Republican power in Virginia under existing election law, state and Federal,” and he likely welcomed the Populists’ successes. The Populist Party followed in the footsteps of the Readjusters and retained many of their supporters, but their supporters were primarily white men, and the movement never had the same crossover with black people in urban centers that the Readjusters had. They were eventually defeated by the Democrats through the same appeals to white supremacy that had toppled the Readjusters.131

Mahone’s leadership of the Readjuster and Republican Parties in Virginia saw the state prosper with new industry and protect black suffrage and access to education in ways not seen in the other former Confederate states. Remarkably, Mahone used his reputation as a soldier and railroad man to break out of the Conservative ranks and bring these Republican policies to Virginia at a time when the party was essentially in retreat across the South. This was made possible due to Mahone’s willingness to adopt almost any position in order to advance his goals for himself and the state, and because of black Virginians’ willingness to embrace any potential

avenue for participation in the political workings of the state despite fierce resistance.

Ultimately, the Democratic resistance to black suffrage was increased and the Democrats undertook a decade long crusade to destroy Mahone. This demonstrated the pervasiveness of white supremacy in Virginia and made it unlikely the Republican Party in Virginia could exist without leaders like Mahone who would use their authority to cater to both black and white people via patronage and a class based economic message. Mahone’s switch to the Republicans proved more distasteful to white Virginians because of his Confederate service and his reputation as a traitor and apostate defined him in the last few years of his life among white Virginians.
Figure 17: “The New South and Old Fossils.” During Mahone’s last campaign in 1889, he continued to emphasize his vision for Virginia in comparison to the Democratic Party. In this Readjuster political cartoon, a figure likely meant to be Mahone encourages a white farmer to drop his plow and points to what are possibly black farmers with the image of the New South behind him. The image portrays the Readjusters as a beacon of hope and progress for Virginia and the laboring classes via industry, while the Conservative Party “fossils” are portrayed as part of a beastly cuttlefish that can only spout “niggar” instead of any policy. In the text below, every criticism of Mahone is refuted in detail while a black man says, “golly!! Aint white folks afraid of my talent!” thereby mocking the Democrats’ fears of black people and demonstrating Mahone’s own paternalistic view of them. Vol 39, 1889, Box 219, Scrapbooks, WMP.
Figure 18: “Up Salt River” The election of Democrat Phillip W. McKinney in 1889 signaled the end of William Mahone’s challenge to the Democratic Party in Virginia. McKinney followed in the footsteps of Fitzhugh Lee by adopting most of Mahone’s economic proposals while working to disenfranchise black voters and poor whites in the state. Virginia would not have a non-Democrat as governor until after the Civil Rights Movement. In this Democratic cartoon from 1889, we can see Fitzhugh Lee welcoming McKinney to the governor’s mansion while Mahone floats up the metaphorical “Salt River,” a term used to denote political oblivion. (Scrapbook 41, Box 221, WMP.)
By the time of his death, white Virginians portrayed Mahone as responsible for all the odious racial and social policies of Radical Reconstruction. I argue that subsequently white historians adopted this portrayal of Mahone and the Readjusters to fit into the Dunning School of Reconstruction that emphasized tyrannical northerners and black people ruling over a ruined South. In the era of Jim Crow, white southerners looked back at the period of African American voting during Reconstruction as a dangerous reminder that their current social order had not always been so. In this context, various southern authors and politicians crafted a narrative of the Reconstruction years in scholarship and textbooks that justified the current status quo of white supremacy and convinced many northerners that the attempt to reconstruct the South had indeed
been a tragic blunder. That Mahone had been a famous Confederate veteran presented somewhat of an obstacle to this story, and this chapter analyzes scholarly monographs, textbooks, obituaries from Mahone’s death through the mid twentieth century to demonstrate how white Virginians commemorated Mahone as a Confederate veteran and ignored the Readjusters so as not to provide a historical example of black suffrage during the Jim Crow era. African Americans rarely referenced the Readjusters or Mahone in the decades following his death as they continued to look for political movements that would benefit them with an eye on the present and future. It was at the intersection of these white and black memories that the Readjuster Party faded into the background.132

Obituaries: The Construction of a Narrative

William Mahone died in Washington D.C. on October 8, 1895 a week after suffering a stroke. Mahone’s obituaries highlighted his Confederate service as something all white Virginians could easily celebrate. Despite his defeat in 1889, Mahone’s name still carried weight in Virginia politics when he died, and Virginia’s Democrats knew they needed to carefully frame Mahone’s legacy as they faced another third-party challenge in the growing populist movement in the state, that was supported by the majority of Mahone’s old coalition. After his death the unique dichotomy of Mahone’s martial record and his political career remained a topic ripe for interpretation, and Obituaries of Mahone in papers written by white Virginians labored to fit Mahone’s legacy into a comfortable Lost Cause narrative.133

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133 For Mahone’s end of life see Blake, William Mahone of Virginia, 253,254.
Many of Mahone’s fiercest critics found that praising the late General’s wartime service was an effective way to bypass any discussion of his more recent and controversial actions in Virginia politics. Newspaper obituaries featured casual snippets that trumpeted his war record and nothing else; one wrote that “Mahone is no more…he fought like a tiger at the Crater.” Various pieces like this one reveal that the only part about Mahone’s legacy that was important to the white southern vision of the South in the years ahead was his role in the Confederacy’s last great triumph at the Crater. Reading between the lines was not required in some accounts of why Mahone should be honored and venerated after his death. The Peninsula Enterprise succinctly laid out the argument by which white Virginians could welcome one who had done so much for the Confederacy back into their sacrosanct collective memory of the Lost Cause: “Virginians, for the most part, prefer to remember the good there was in him. His great ability, his love for Virginia, his distinguished services to the Confederacy no one questions, and they go very far to atone for the mistakes he made afterwards,” the obituary stated. This account essentially forgave Mahone for his political career and used this forgiveness to side-step any discussion of it.134

To neutralize Mahone’s controversial legacy some obituaries defended Mahone the Confederate and argued that this loyal Virginian had been duped by traitors like governor Cameron and Republican politicians. On October 9, 1895 the Richmond Times stated that William Mahone had a “hypnotic spell” cast over him by Governor Cameron, and it was this spell that convinced Mahone to defect from the Democratic Party. This left Mahone allegedly a “broken and disappointed man” once he realized he had been duped by his erstwhile political ally into presumably betraying his native state. That Cameron had been a Mahone nominee

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134 “Mahone is no More,” Crawford Avalanche, Oct 17, 1895; “General Mahone is Dead,” Peninsula Enterprise Oct 12, 1895.
before splitting with him contradicted this author’s purpose and was excluded. Obituaries of the late general typically simplified his life as a loyal son of the South worthy of fond remembrance. The *Times* concluded with a spirit of reconciliation that Mahone fostered by “exchanging courtesies” with Union veterans on their visits to Petersburg. In this way Mahone was portrayed as a confused man who was persuaded by others to abandon the Conservative Party and that he believed in none of the polices he advocated for in the 1880s, leaving him a shell of himself after 1889. Obituaries like this one were a subtle jab at the late general, but they were also a direct manifestation of the need to simplify the memory of complex individuals and events to serve the needs of the Lost Cause.\(^{135}\)

Obituaries reframed Mahone’s actions in a less radical light when they argued his support of black suffrage was out of a paternalistic instinct and that his Republican loyalties were a justified attempt to align himself with the reunited nation. This represented a shift in Lost Cause arguments leading up to the turn of the twentieth century. The Lost Cause continued to venerate Lee and Jackson, and to find only noble impulses behind the Confederate movement for independence; however, it also celebrated a United States poised on the brink of the twentieth century as worthy of the loyalty of all Americans. The *Times* represented this shift in its obituary when it wrote about Mahone’s sense of duty in “defending the weaker race, while loving the Lost Cause and remaining true and loyal to the Union.” Rather than discussing the radical policies of Mahone and the Readjusters this obituary articulated a form of reconciliation between northern and southern whites, with Mahone as the centerpiece in this instance. However, as several bitter obituaries show, many white southerners were unwilling to separate the veneration

\(^{135}\) *Richmond Times*, October 9, 1895
of Mahone as a Confederate hero from his machinations as a Readjuster and Republican senator.\textsuperscript{136}

These were relatively mild treatments of Mahone’s career, but many Democrats used obituaries to continue the scathing attacks they had used to discredit him when he was still alive and thereby reinforce their view of Mahone as a villain. Many Democratic papers gloated in his passing and saw in his death a guarantee of their final victory. \textit{The Durham Recorder} captured the tone of several bitter obituaries, writing, “General Mahone, as is generally the case, is having some really nice things said about him now that he is dead,” and another wrote that Mahone was a “firebrand” who “through the peculiar attitude he assumed…caused one of the most bitter controversies ever known in the senate.” Of course, opinions had always been mixed about Mahone’s career. Leading up to his death \textit{The Richmond Dispatch} took jabs at Mahone when it cited how James Longstreet, “was very much affected” by Mahone’s worsening condition and asserted that Longstreet was the only prominent ex-Confederate visitor to Mahone’s death bed, clearly drawing the connection between the two despised Republican ex-Confederates. Following his death, the paper commented that “Mahone was always trying to conquer or subjugate somebody.” This stance on Mahone, including the focus on Longstreet’s visit, demonstrated how Mahone’s political affiliation post-war remained the central issue for many white southerners and not his record in battle.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Richmond Times}, Nov 28, 1895; This is best understood in the shift in Lost Cause memory toward the end of the 19 Century. As summarized in Gary Gallagher, \textit{Lee and his Generals in War and Memory} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 269.

In death as in life, the only accounts to focus on the accomplishments of the Readjuster Party were obituaries written by northerners and African Americans. These papers mourned the loss of someone who had fought against the Democratic regime in Virginia, and they generally set aside the internecine bitterness that marked Mahone’s final campaign in 1889. The African American run newspaper, *The Evening Star*, based out of Washington D.C., acknowledged Mahone’s legacy as being inextricably wrapped up in his biracial political activism. Mahone was a “firebrand cast into a mass of dry tinder who favored equal treatment for the black man,” it stated. Whether or not this was an entirely accurate representation of Mahone’s views, it reflected how many black people viewed him, and their obituaries make clear that initially, many refused to let this aspect of his legacy die out, especially during the Populist Movement in Virginia in the last years of the nineteenth century. African Americans in Virginia were faced with new disenfranchisement laws in the 1890s, and in this context another black paper published a Mahone obituary that nostalgically looked back at him as a reformer with the following segment: “General Mahone, who was stricken with paralysis a day or so ago, has the sympathy of the entire country. No man has done as much to improve the condition of the southern negro as this distinguished statesman. He stands without peer in the American body politic…he is a generous and good man, and not only Virginia will feel the loss of his services, but the entire South.” This obituary emphasized Mahone’s personality as a “fighter,” directly alluding to his fight against the Democrats as a politician. One year following his death, *The Richmond Planet* referred to Mahone as a “brilliant Confederate soldier” to emphasize how his aggressive martial personality had directly benefited black people during his political career. For these journalists, Mahone’s value was that despite fighting for the Confederacy, his aggressive
personality had, at least briefly, given black Virginians increased rights, and they likely wished for more figures like Mahone who would challenge the accepted political order in the present.\textsuperscript{138}

**Justifying White Supremacy: The Readjusters’ Legacy in Scholarship**

After years of trying to establish their hegemony in Virginia, the Democratic elite ultimately accomplished this goal with the passage of the 1902 state constitution that legalized disenfranchisement. The Democrats had finally succeeded in attaching Mahone to what they perceived to be the worst aspects of Reconstruction. If white Virginians heard of Mahone at all, it was either as a Confederate veteran or as a bogeyman who had threatened white supremacy.

During debate on the constitution, *The Dispatch* wrote that “Mahone captured the state of Virginia in an ill-omened hour for her fame. He sunk to a political damnation so deep that the hand of resurrection has never reached him and has never reached any of his followers.”

Tellingly, after the constitution was passed, there was a relative silence concerning William Mahone in Virginia’s press, white or black, for the first decade of the twentieth century. With Mahone and his movement buried in what seemed a distant and unfulfilled past for African Americans, and with white Virginians’ place in society enshrined into law, there was no reason to rehabilitate the memory of General Mahone. It would take the increased commemorative activities at Petersburg battlefield to drive Mahone’s legacy into the spotlight once more for white and black Virginians.\textsuperscript{139}

Charles Pearson and Richard Morton published the first scholarly monographs of the Readjuster movement in 1917 and 1919 respectively, to make it an acceptable part of the Dunning School’s ideology. For Pearson, Mahone and the Readjusters were part of “the Dark

\textsuperscript{138} Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), Oct 1, 1895; Washington Bee, Oct 5, 1895; Richmond Planet, Oct 10, 1896.

\textsuperscript{139} Virginian Pilot, Oct 15, 1899. Richmond Dispatch, Oct 20, 1901.
Age of the South,” which encompassed the end of the Civil War up until Pearson’s own lifetime. He placed special emphasis on the “negro voters...as Mahone’s inferior allies” and presented his discussion of the Readjuster movement with many stereotypes of the period. Richard Morton similarly demonstrated the desire to defend white supremacy in his account of the movement when he described Mahone as nothing more than a political agitator and that the “true evil of Mahoneism” was the installation of black representatives in predominantly white counties in order to secure his power. The vilification of Mahone as a political traitor to the South was used by these scholars as a convenient mechanism to discredit him and portray any racial equality he fostered as the actions of a corrupt politician. These accounts served the dual purpose of reminding Virginians, both white and black, that the Democratic Party had protected white Virginians from corrupting influences during Reconstruction and that it continued to have their best interests in mind.¹⁴⁰

White scholarship on the 1902 constitution in the first few decades of the twentieth century agreed that disenfranchising the black voter had been a desirable result of the convention of 1901-1902, and one scholar of the convention argued that William Mahone was the reason they did this. In 1926, a future professor at the University of Richmond, Ralph McDanel, wrote a thesis about the 1902 constitution that served as the culmination of the previous two decades of

¹⁴⁰ Charles Pearson, *The Readjuster Movement in Virginia* (Gloucester: Yale University Press, 1917), VII. 176; Richard Morton, *The Negro in Virginia Politics 1865-1902* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1919), 6, 103, 115; The Dunning School was comprised of white scholars in the early twentieth century who studied under William Archibald Dunning at Columbia University. These scholars argued that Reconstruction had been a tyrannical period of northern control over a ruined white South. For the classic Dunning School text see Claude G. Bowers *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln*. New York City, NY: Cornwall Press, 1929. Bower’s work is the standard account of Reconstruction from a white supremacist perspective. It portrays the period as one of only corruption and tyranny carried out on southern whites by ignorant Republicans and black people.
Dunning School interpretations of Reconstruction. He argued that Mahone was a failed businessman and shameful opportunist whose only desire had been to deliver Virginia into the hands of Radical Republicans and black people and that white Virginians had no desire to disenfranchise black people before the machinations of Mahone. As McDanel wrote, “Mahone had resurrected the specter of negro domination, of Africanization, and thereafter the white people of the black belt regarded as excusable any means that would assure white supremacy…it seems safe to say that Virginia owes her present constitution very largely to General Mahone.” In McDanel’s analysis, ensuring white supremacy was a completely understandable impulse for white Virginians to have and men like Mahone had shattered racial harmony by their political action. This fit directly in the framework of white Reconstruction scholarship of the time, even though revisionists would begin to challenge some of this scholarship in the next decade. That a professor wrote this analysis as late as 1926 demonstrates how effectively Mahone’s legacy had been corrupted by the Democrats by the end of his life and, in a Virginia society where white supremacy was a fact of daily life, there was no impetus for a nuanced analysis of the Readjuster years. One man who attended the constitutional convention shortly before his death was one of Mahone’s old Readjuster comrades, turned arch rival, Parson John Massey. Massey’s attendance demonstrated that many white Readjusters had never been comfortable with the party’s overtures to the black voter during its brief stay in power. And with the collapse of Mahone and the Republicans in Virginia, there was no significant white opposition to the drafting of Virginia’s new constitution.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{141} Ralph Clipman McDanel, \textit{The Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1901-1902} (1926; repr., New York: Da capo Press, 1972), 8; For a more recent work on the convention see Wythe W. Holt, \textit{Virginia’s Constitutional Convention of 1901-1902} (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1990); see also Harry Edward Poindexter, “From Copy-Desk to Congress: The Pre-Congressional Career of Carter Glass.” Ph.D. dissertation (University of Virginia, 1966). Carter Glass was a prominent member at the
While no early twentieth century white scholarship argued the Readjuster Party had been a force for good in the state, Mahone’s legacy as a Confederate and a successful businessman occasionally maintained the respect of scholars who otherwise completely accepted the Dunning School’s view of Reconstruction. In a 1904 account, just two years after the constitution was passed, Hamilton Eckenrode, a Virginia historian, praised Mahone’s military and railroad career while faithfully criticizing the dangers of “negro rule” during Reconstruction. In order to absolve Mahone the Confederate, Eckenrode claimed that Reconstruction ended in 1870 and that Readjusters (with no mention of Mahone) and Republicans were evil for advocating racial equality and that “it was impossible that any such attempt should succeed.” Eckenrode published this as his dissertation and would go onto write about Jefferson Davis and Nathan Bedford Forest. His accounts stressed national reconciliation and portrayed disenfranchisement as simply a natural conclusion without much bitterness directed at anyone who had opposed it. This is perhaps why he did not criticize Mahone as, from his perspective, the issue of black suffrage had been sensibly settled by the 1902 constitution and his work did not make much effort to place this act in the context of the previous decades.142

The 1902 state constitution ensured white supremacy in Virginia for the foreseeable future and this, combined with the ideology of the Lost Cause, made sure that most white southerners viewed the triumph of southern whites over the alleged evils of black Republican Reconstruction as a timeless truth by the turn of the twentieth century. Scholar David Goldfield

Convention of 1901. He unequivocally described their intent to discriminate against the black voter of the state when he said “that is precisely what we propose; that, exactly, is what the constitution was elected for to discriminate to the very extremity of permissible action under the limitations of the federal Constitution, with a view to elimination of every negro voter who can be gotten rid of, legally without materially impairing the numerical strength of the white electorate.”

argues that this amounted to the creation of an entirely new history for white southerners that justified their place on top of the social hierarchy and honored the history and traditions of the Old South. In this context any mention, let alone analysis, of William Mahone and the Readjusters was a direct challenge to the white supremacy of the Jim Crow South from which white people benefitted from and thus, however famous Mahone the Confederate had been, his legacy had to be molded by Lost Cause adherents to fit their collective memory of Reconstruction. Black people in Virginia harbored their own memories of Reconstruction during this period that emphasized emancipation over any political movements. This clash between a mythologized white supremacist history for white southerners and memory in the black community created two distinct memories that, according to Goldfield, “floated past each other unknowing.” These two collective memories assured that Virginia Democrats would control any discussion of the legacy of William Mahone and the Readjuster Party.143

The Readjuster movement was so controversial that many white historians initially ignored it altogether. While racism undergirded these decisions, the Readjusters also contrasted the story these scholars wanted to tell: the ultimate “triumph” of white Redeemers in the South over the Republican North. In James Ford Rhodes’ eight-volume History of the United States, the Readjuster years are skipped over entirely. Rhodes wrote in the preface to the eighth and final volume that, initially, “the year 1877 when occurred the final restoration of home rule in the

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143 David Goldfield, Southern Histories: Public, Personal and Sacred (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 8-10. Goldfield describes how “the construction of southern history after the Civil War rejected a forward-looking vision, a foundation from which to forge into the future…the Lost Cause allowed them to remain “self-assured and self-righteous.” He alleged “new men” in charge in the South found that they were commonly united by their experience in the Civil War and the old ideals of the pre-war period. And that the Lost Cause “provided white southerners with a purpose after a devastating defeat: to honor the old South, commemorate the fallen heroes, and preserve redemption.” For a discussion on white southern identity being formed in the postwar period see James Cobb, Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 67.
South, was a more fitting termination” [for his study]. Rhodes continued his history to 1896, but he made no mention of the Readjuster Party in Virginia. Throughout his work he advocated the white supremacist view that African Americans were too incompetent to participate effectively in politics and stated that “From the Republican Party no real good came to negroes. Most of them developed no political capacity, and the few who raised themselves above the mass did not reach a high order of intelligence.” Rhodes delineated a historical memory of Reconstruction that ended full stop with the removal of federal soldiers from the South in 1877 to focus on the racist narrative that white southerners faced a threat of “negro domination” during this period. Any discussion of the Readjuster movement in his work would have challenged his narrative of the restoration of Democratic political power in the hands of white men after 1877.144

Mahone’s controversial legacy resulted in the first biography of the general not being published until 1935. The author, Nelson Blake, touted Mahone’s record as a proud Confederate and remained entirely mute on the participation of African Americans in his political career. Blake incorrectly asserted that Mahone enjoyed wide support among white Virginians and the

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his “only mistake…was placing too many Mahone men throughout the state.” This biography prefaced the trend seen in a later textbook from 1957 by emphasizing Mahone’s character without touching on racial issues both in Mahone’s political and military career. In his description of the Battle of the Crater Blake stated that “half-drunken negroes, clamoring ‘no quarter’ were met by the Virginia troops, many of them Petersburg boys, who were fighting for all they cherished as most dear and sacred…at this juncture, however, a white handkerchief was raised in the pit and, at the Confederate response, a large number of willing prisoners came crowding over the crest of the Crater. Mahone was master of the Scene!” Blake’s aim was to glorify Mahone and fit him comfortably into the Lost Cause dominated society of the day. There was no mention of the execution of black POWS at the Crater which aligned with commemorations at the battlefield itself which included no presence or mention of African Americans. Blake’s only reference to the racial issues that undergirded the Readjuster movement came in a litany of Mahone’s own comments reprinted, seemingly without irony and without judgement. Perhaps Blake believed the supposed naivety of Mahone’s attitudes towards African Americans continued to speak for itself to any white reader, who would be a firm believer in the racist views about African Americans that were promoted by the Lost Cause in the 1930s.145

**Textbooks Exclude William Mahone**

Scholarly arguments that ignored the Readjuster Party and promoted a white supremacist view of Reconstruction found their way to the general public through school textbooks. Authored collaboratively by scholars and government officials, late nineteenth and early twentieth century

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textbooks distilled the postwar years into a tale of a triumphant white South rising from the ashes of black Republican tyranny. As scholar Elaine Parsons argues, these textbooks were a product of their time and demonstrated their authors’ desire to create a useable history that affirmed the white supremacy of Jim Crow. In this way, the innumerable complexities of Reconstruction were simplified through repetitive stories in school textbooks, and the white on black violence and oppression of the period “became comfortably familiar as inevitable things we had suffered and overcome to become ourselves.”

Many of these textbooks were written by Virginians, and while they rarely directly mentioned the Readjuster Party, the Readjuster movement was essentially the only period of “Radical Reconstruction” in Virginia, and thus these Virginia scholars’ critiques of Reconstruction were almost certainly based off their lived experiences during the 1880s. All these textbooks share three main themes: The alleged conspiracy between Radical Republicans and black people to control the southern whites via black voters, the necessity and nobility of the Klu Klux Klan, and the untarnished valor of Confederate war heroes and triumph of white Redeemers. These textbooks were unashamedly partisan in their adoration of the South, but the publication of some of them in the major publishing house of New York suggests that their portrayal of Reconstruction was widely accepted by white people both North and South throughout the early twentieth century.

With Mahone defeated in 1889, prominent textbook authors updated their work to represent an allegedly harmonious period of Democratic control during the previous decade. Mary Tucker Magill’s textbook for Virginia’s elementary school students was taught in Virginia.

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for over forty years. Updated in 1890, it brazenly stated how the “the period from 1870 to 1890 has been barren of interesting events.” Magill was a Conservative and would not let the discord of the Readjuster years stand in the way of her praise for the forward progress of Virginia’s economy and public-school system, and the fact that Virginia had the Readjuster Party to thank for both developments is not mentioned in her textbook. Instead she subtly critiqued the Party for its agitation over the state’s debt: “we can only hope that the record of the old state in the past will not be blotted by any unworthy action in the present crisis,” Magill wrote, likely referring to the populist resurgence in the 1890s. If the issues of the Readjuster years surfaced at all in these early textbooks they did so as the bookend to a period of progress in Virginia as another Virginia professor remarked in his textbook for school children, “happily in 1892 an agreement was reached between the legislature and the bondholders by which the debt was adjusted, and the matter is not likely again to disturb the politics of the state.” The bitter infighting over the Debt and the Readjuster movement it created was of course a challenging issue for school children to grasp, but the fact that both of these works essentially summarized over two decades with these brief comments demonstrated each author’s desire to defend the status quo of white Democrats in power.147

Every southern textbook of this period asserted that the Republicans’ support of black suffrage was futile at best and a criminal imposition on the white South at worst. Black people have no agency in any of these accounts; rather, they existed as only pawns who had been controlled by opportunistic white men, and the Republican Party at large, to punish the South.

147 Mary Tucker Magill, The History of Virginia for the Use of Schools (Lynchburg: J.P. Bell Company, 1890), 372-373 (All textbooks, except where noted, are from collections of the American Civil War Museum in Richmond Virginia. Their textbook collection is currently housed at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture, also located in Richmond Virginia); Royall Bascom Smithey, History of Virginia: A Brief Textbook for Schools (New York: American Book Company, 1898), 247.
These textbooks operated as a direct critique of the Readjusters’ policies in Virginia, if an unstated one. According to these textbooks, black people lacked the intelligence to vote and any attempt to elevate them to an equal status with white people was inherently unwise. One textbook published in 1907 was typical of many when it stated that Republicans “resolved to take from the educated, intelligent white men, trained for two hundred years in the science of government, all political rights and power and give the South over to the control of a vast and irresponsible horde of negroes, all of them ignorant and inexperienced and many of them vicious…the negro exhibits none of the results that forty years of freedom and industrial opportunity…are popularly supposed to have produced.” Most of these accounts give no time frame or context to these claims, they simply portrayed the Reconstruction years as “dark days for the South” that upset the racial harmony the southern states had supposedly enjoyed before and shortly after the war. The nature of Republicans and black people are stated as established fact, unopen to challenge.148

The majority of these early twentieth century textbooks were written by former Confederates and their descendants who had a direct attachment to the values of the antebellum South that the Readjusters had disrupted. A major fear held by many of this elite across the South during Reconstruction was of opportunistic southern white men who worked with Republicans and black people to upset southern whites’ control over society and these opportunists were commonly referred to as scallywags. In Virginia, William Mahone was the quintessential example of a “scallywag” southerner and when textbooks published for Virginia schools railed against said scallywags there can be little doubt that he was on said author’s minds. Susan

Pendleton Lee, the daughter of Robert E. Lee’s chief of artillery William Pendleton, published a school textbook in 1899 that blamed scallywags for the feared “negro rule” in Virginia. Pendleton wrote that “they gained ascendancy over the ignorant, inexperienced, credulous negroes by flattery and cajolment, and got themselves elected to all the best offices, while the Radical Congress backed them up.” That black men only obtained marginal representation in state government under the Readjusters was not a point authors like Susan Pendleton were interested in considering; their participation at all was viewed as a direct challenge to white supremacy, and textbooks were the ideal medium for a redefined narrative that would take hold among future students. As another textbook published by an actual veteran of General Lee’s army put it, present histories “lose their value by an attempt to be neutral.” These new accounts were southern histories written for white people to legitimize the teachings of Jubal Early’s Lost Cause for future generations.149

The success of the Democratic backlash against Mahone, and Republicanism in Virginia in general, was also reflected in the textbooks published by the generation of white Virginians who came of age during the tumultuous politics of the 1870s and 1880s. Henry Alexander White is one such example. Born in 1861 in Virginia he graduated from Washington and Lee College and wrote biographies of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. In his 1904 School History of the United States White declared his intention to write a “southern history” and titled the period of 1868-1877: “negro rule in the South.” He described this period as a time when “deprivation and lawlessness reigned supreme.” White’s account demonstrated that the traditional Conservatives that Mahone had fought against as a Readjuster had complete control of the narrative of those

years at the turn of the century. They had educated White, among many others, in the tenants of
the Lost Cause and these men would in turn write the history that would educate the next
generation of young Virginians. White’s account venerated Lee and Jackson for several chapters
in a style that would have pleased Jubal Early and he framed Reconstruction as the attempt by
black men to control the state. That these textbooks were published for school children ensured
that the Lost Cause was inculcated in the collective consciousness of white Virginians.150

The influential nature of these textbooks can be further seen in the repetition of their
arguments in textbooks by northern authors. In these textbooks, there was no trace of the
Republican criticisms of the Democratic violence against black people seen during the
Readjuster years. A professor from Pennsylvania stated in his 1907 textbook that the Klan had
occasionally murdered black people, but that this had been justified to “save the civilization of
the South.” As Elaine Parsons demonstrates, the Klu-Klux Klan were sensationalized in school
textbooks to stand in for the entirety of white on black violence and election fraud in the
Reconstruction years, thereby framing the violence of that period behind an allegedly mysterious
and inexplicable organization, rather than confronting the reality that white supremacist violence
was commonplace.151 The northern trend to repeat Lost Cause views about Reconstruction in its
textbooks carried on into the mid twentieth century when, in 1953, a professor from Columbia
University stated that “negroes who had now the least understanding of politics and more than
three-fourths of whom could not read or write, formed a majority of the voters.” With northern
textbooks repeating the tenets of the Lost Cause with respect to Reconstruction there was
essentially no counter view in print in textbooks for school children in the United States. These

150 Henry Alexander White, *A School History of the United States* (New York: silver Burdett and
Company, 1904), 332, 364, 390.
textbooks reinforced the narrative of Lost Cause adherents with no room for analysis of people like William Mahone who did not neatly fit into this mold.  

William Mahone the politician was not mentioned in any popular Virginia textbooks until 1957 because the Readjuster Party clashed with the accepted timeline of Reconstruction that ended in 1877. It took until 1957, when some revisionist historians had begun to publish new perspectives on Reconstruction, for Mahone’s political activity to appear in a Virginia textbook. This particular work discussed the Readjusters in familiar white supremacist terms but reflected more positively on Mahone’s personality. William Mahone was “willing to fight for what he considered right, even though he disturbed the peace in Virginia…Virginians disliked seeing untrained negroes put in office,” the book stated. In this passage, Mahone’s leadership and boldness can still be praised while lamenting the “regrettable” act of black suffrage that he encouraged. This textbook even mentioned the “Danville Riot,” which had not appeared in any school textbook up to this point, but it discussed it in purely white supremacist terms and blamed the “wild talk” of the Readjuster Party for inciting the riot, in which “several lives were lost.” The textbook used the riot as justification for its next statement that “ever afterward the governors of Virginia have been Democrats.” It is a testament to the power of textbooks to ingrain false narratives about the past that this school textbook in 1957 echoed the Democratic Party’s racist propaganda from the aftermath of the Danville Massacre in 1883. On the eve of the  

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Civil Rights movement, Reconstruction history was still shrouded in Dunning School narratives among white Virginians.  

**Conclusion: A Monument For Mahone**

The year of 1913 marked a shift in some white Virginians’ views on William Mahone that coincided with a high point for Civil War commemorations among veterans and the American public at large. The largest reunion took place at the Gettysburg battlefield and, despite continued disagreement over various aspects of the war’s legacy, the American public, especially southern whites, bought into a narrative of the war that emphasized the valor of soldiers on both sides. In the context of this national reunion, the image of William Mahone as the Confederate war hero was rehabilitated in Virginia. After roughly a decade of silence, there was a flurry of publications in the local papers over the extensive support the United Daughters of the Confederacy received to construct a monument to Mahone somewhere in Petersburg or on the Crater battlefield. Already in 1911 there had been a widely publicized event of Union veterans visiting Mahone’s tombstone unannounced and placing wreaths upon it. Local papers called this “a beautiful tribute to the patriotism and bravery of Southern soldiers.” By 1915, the fever pitch of commemorative ceremonies across the country included regular gatherings at the Crater and for this event the memory of General Mahone took center stage.

The Battle of the Crater was the crucial event that white southerners used to celebrate Mahone in a manner agreeable to the Lost Cause while avoiding all discussion of his cooperation with black people in the 1880s. In the eyes of white Virginians, the valor of the Confederacy was

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154 *Richmond Times Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), March 1915, Feb 1, 1915, May 31, 1911.
155 Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 1-5.
something to be remembered and cherished. A statue to Mahone at the Crater would solidify his memory as a heroic Confederate general and ensure the complexities of his political career would remain undiscussed. Commemorations at the Crater itself already took place frequently with VMI cadets reenacting the battle to hundreds of onlookers. These commemorations occurred without any African Americans, despite their prominence in the battle to reinforce the Crater’s legacy as the Confederacy’s last great triumph. Mahone himself had regularly promoted his role at the Crater throughout his life and would make an easy figurehead for white memory of the battle. His actions to safeguard his war record, especially the Crater, were ultimately part of the construction of his memory that remained palatable to the Lost Cause yet isolated enough to silence his organization of the Readjusters.\(^{156}\)

As the 1915 summer commemorations of the Battle of the Crater approached, Mahone the politician needed to be reconciled with the Lost Cause. To accomplish this the legacy of Mahone, the proud Confederate hero, who had been relatively forgotten in the years since his death, was once more touted in the press. There was “no difference of opinion as to the brilliance of Mahone’s soldierly record,” claimed the *Times*, and it followed this piece up with many dramatic descriptions of Mahone’s brigade at the Crater when it wrote, “outnumbered five to one by the federals…his men made that memorable charge.” Some companies even saw an apparent commercial value in a rehabilitation of Mahone’s legacy. One company called Blue Ridge Water posted an endorsement for its spring water allegedly given by the late general himself: “For twenty years I have constantly used it,” Mahone supposedly said. That this company saw nothing unusual about printing an endorsement from a man who had been dead for twenty years

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\(^{156}\) For the meaning of monuments in the postwar landscape see Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*; For white commemorations at the Crater and their political significance see Kevin Levin, *Remembering The Battle of the Crater*, 69-85.
suggested the perceived power the symbol of Mahone still had in Virginia, and with renewed support for a Mahone monument, the time was apparently right for advertisement. Later that year, after the summer commemoration at the Crater had come and gone, the *Times* included Mahone in several of their “fifty years ago today” segments, lauding his Confederate record.¹⁵⁷

Even papers that had always been ardently anti Mahone demonstrated how his memory could be molded to fit into the Lost Cause narrative of the twentieth century. The *Alexandria Gazette*, which was perhaps the single most vitriolic paper in its prior coverage of Mahone, now openly supported a Mahone statue, calling his political career “a minor incident in the career of a great man…while the Gazette never approved of his political course it is hoped a plan to erect a shaft to his memory on the battlefield of the Crater will crystallize.” The Gazette had never retreated on its stance on Mahone’s political career, and just a few years previously, it had demanded a Democratic candidate for Governor “firmly deny” accusations that he had been a friend of the long deceased General Mahone. Even more recently, the paper had firmly reminded its readers that “The Readjuster coalition was responsible for hordes of renegade Virginians, and Negroes. This was a sad fact of her mistake... (in those years).” Yet now with the Crater commemorations honoring the white South, with no mention of black soldiers, the Gazette welcomed a monument to Mahone that recognized his service as a soldier and not as a politician. This would thereby accomplish the desire of many of his former opponents to remove any discussion of the Readjusters from public life.¹⁵⁸

Faced with legalized disenfranchisement the African American press in Virginia remained relatively silent on the Readjusters and General Mahone since his death. But from 1910 to 1930 there were sporadic references to the late general that argued for commemorations of Mahone from both a practical and emotional perspective. In a piece titled “A Different Type of monument for General Mahone” the author argued that the lesson of the Readjusters was what black people could achieve in the realm of public education if they were united. The article described how “Mahone wrought wonders by ulterior (political) motives in Virginia,” and that, any money raised for a monument to general Mahone would be better spent on libraries, hospitals and schools for the black community, as these projects would represent the very best of the results from the Readjuster movement of the distant past. If a link to Mahone was needed, “simple busts” of the General could be placed around in “conspicuous places” in said libraries. A different perspective appeared in, a poignant piece in the same paper during July that advocated funding a bronze statue of Mahone to safeguard the memory of black people in Virginia’s past. William A. Hewitt referred to Mahone as “our lamented Moses in Virginia” and he recommended building a large statue to him as “a sign of Negro thankfulness and love and to remind the world that Negroes lived in Virginia once.” These pieces demonstrated that Mahone’s legacy was used as a contemporary lesson for black Virginians who could not engage in the political activism that they believed many of their race had in the Readjuster years. While black Readjusters had faced their own discrimination and never occupied a prominent place in party leadership, the Readjusters represented a time when whites had included black men in politics and maybe they would do so again. As one paper put it, black people should be patient until white people “invite the negro in through the front door…and learn obedience through suffering.” Taken together these accounts viewed Mahone and the Readjusters as an idea of what
might have been instead of the current reality of Jim Crow. The memory of Mahone himself was of little importance to black people, but his politics carried powerful symbolism of a time when black people had voted in Virginia.\textsuperscript{159}

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s The Norfolk \textit{New Journal and Guide} returned to the subject of Mahone and the Readjusters in 1982 and offered a more skeptical view from the perspective of black rights in the modern era. The column argued that the Readjusters were just another instance of black people being used by white leadership and given no material benefit. The author wrote that “Black voters were manipulated to serve one white faction or another, without receiving any benefit themselves…Mahone fits into a historical pattern of white politicians using black voters for their own political needs.” While there is undeniable truth to this statement, the article offered little analysis of the movement itself and instead used the Readjusters to emphasize that at no point during Reconstruction were African Americans truly seen as equals by white people. With the accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement, it made sense that a black newspaper would view the Readjuster Party’s history as inconsequential in the long struggle for Civil Rights.\textsuperscript{160}

No monument to Mahone was completed until 1927, when a stone obelisk was constructed at the Crater. While Mahone was never remotely as significant a Confederate figure as Lee or Jackson, the delay in any marker to him was likely caused by the lingering harsh


\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Norfolk New Journal and Guide}, Feb 1982; See also Bess Beatty, \textit{A Revolution Gone Backward: The Black Response to National Politics, 1876-1896}. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987) This work gives another perspective on the Readjusters that echoes concern over viewing the movement’s black supporters as a solid “crowd” but ultimately presents a more positive perspective on how African Americans viewed Mahone and the movement.
feelings towards his postwar career among Petersburg residents. In 1956, a Petersburg resident recounted that “resentment in Petersburg over Mahone’s postwar politics was strong enough in 1927 to cause his monument to be erected at the Crater battlefield rather than nearer the city as originally planned.” This sentiment also thwarted a move to name the present Crater Road in his honor. In 1914 and 1917, markers to the path marched by Mahone’s brigade in its counter attack at the Crater had been funded and erected by the UDC, and the fact that General Mahone, so famous among white southerners after the battle, took so long to receive a monument is a testament to the power that the memory of William Mahone and the Readjuster Party still had to make white southerners in Petersburg uneasy. Despite Lost Cause commemorations at the battlefield, and numerous newspaper publications that focused on Mahone’s war record, he was still viewed as a symbol of political and racial treachery by at least some whites in Petersburg in 1927 and this resentment was remembered even in 1956. This willful suppression of Mahone’s memory speaks to how disruptive the Readjuster Party was to the racial norms in Virginia during the 1880s and it demonstrated how the ideology of the Lost Cause had never found an acceptable way to incorporate William Mahone into its stories of the Confederate past.\textsuperscript{161}

In conclusion, the memory of William Mahone remained symbolically important in both the white and black communities. In the African American community, Mahone and the Readjuster Party had offered black people in Virginia the most promising avenue for advancement in politics in the years following Reconstruction. The Readjusters did run some black candidates, and the funding they secured for the state after lowering the debt made meaningful impacts for the black community in the form of hospitals, jobs, and schools.

Additionally, party leadership never backed off their acceptance of black suffrage in Virginia. William Mahone himself, while against supporting African American candidates like Langston, showed a willingness to break from his white supporters in order to compromise with the black community where the issue of patronage was concerned. However, black people’s generally positive view of Mahone declined sharply after his political failure and even more sharply after his death. As African Americans faced complete disenfranchisement in the Jim Crow South the focus on Mahone largely disappeared from their accounts.

For white Virginians and ex-Confederates across the South, the memory of William Mahone’s service at the Crater was in constant conflict with his political activities that followed. Attacking his wartime reputation, Southern Democrats and Lost Cause adherents had to contend with the strong support Mahone retained from the men who fought under him at the Crater. But as Mahone passed from the scene, there could be no doubt that the Lost Cause memory was successful in separating Mahone’s battlefield achievements from the controversial legacy of his alliance with African Americans. Mahone’s military legacy was enshrined at the Crater battlefield itself, and not anywhere in his longtime home of Petersburg. Through this deliberate placement of the Mahone monument outside Petersburg, the Daughters of the Confederacy, and supporters of white supremacy across Virginia, molded the controversial firebrand Mahone into a defender of Robert E. Lee and the entire South who had prevented disaster at the Crater. This was the only way that Mahone was permitted to exist in white southern memory.

While the controversial aspects of Mahone’s career were, on the surface, forgotten and silenced, Lost Cause advocates’ perpetual need to interpret his actions at the Crater commemorations and African Americans’ efforts in the early twentieth century to assign some meaning to his movement demonstrated that the legacy of Mahone and the Readjusters still
mattered after his death. The old political battle lines of Readjuster-era racial propaganda were drawn again in the agrarian Populist Movement of the late 1890s, which “easily intensified the fears of white voters [over a return] to black Mahoneism.” While the Democrats defeated this movement with the same tactics they had used to undermine Mahone’s Readjusters a decade earlier, they did not stop Mahone’s past supporters from voting for the populists en masse in the 1890s. With Mahone shortly to pass from the scene, and the changes in racial equality the Readjusters had brought to the Virginia landscape shortly to disappear under the tide of white supremacy, the Readjusters’ impact was not forgotten by Virginians. Rather, it continued to be an outlier that uncomfortably fit into the history of both races, black and white, as one grappled with their disenfranchisement and the other desperately tried to defend their racial supremacy in the New South.162

Our modern debate regarding Confederate monuments across the South reminds us that the power of collective memory and monuments resonates with us today. In October 2017, a letter to the editor in the Roanoke Times advocated for the construction of a monument to General Mahone on Monument Avenue to correct the mistake of statue builders a century ago who “tried to erase Mahone from history” because of his political career. The editorial recounts Mahone’s career before advocating a statue of the general to “put our history into full context.” Virginia does not need any more Confederate monuments, but the fact that William Mahone’s memory has resurfaced, even though it was never commemorated in bronze like so many other Confederates, is an instructive lesson in how memory and commemoration are interrelated in our history. The postwar years defy any singular interpretation or analysis, and as we continue to

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discuss how best to remember the legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction today, it is important to remember that the legacy of that time period was shaped by subsequent generations as much if not more than by those who lived through it.\textsuperscript{163}

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