

“In Memoriam”: Death, Memorial Services, and the Collective Memory of Richmond Colored
Normal, 1881-1913

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ABSTRACT: “In Memoriam”: Death, Memorial Services and the Collective Memory of Richmond Colored Normal, 1881-1913

Beginning in the 1880s, a collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal was developed by the school’s graduates, administrators, and African-American community. Public commemoration, in the form of reunions, anniversary celebrations, and memorial services, sustained this collective memory. Like the emancipation collective memory described by historian David Blight, Richmond Colored Normal’s collective memory held a specific function within the African-American community. It served as a political statement that legitimated the training of African-American teachers and African-American education against white critics. Moreover, it gave the African-American community a sense of encouragement for a better future despite the obstacles faced. This conference paper focuses on one form of public commemoration---memorial services. Death played a vital role in sustaining the collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal. Public memorial services of illustrious normal graduates, students, teachers and administrators brought alumni, students, faculty, and the Richmond community together. These services not only celebrated the life of the deceased but they promoted a particular memory of the school. Through an examination of three memorial services, this paper argues that the collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal shaped the struggle for African-American education at the turn of the century.¹

¹David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 1-5; 300-301.

On October 27, 1913, Superintendent J.A.C. Chandler declared a half-session of classes for the following day at the African American public schools in Richmond, Virginia. According to his memorandum to the “principals of the Colored Schools,” he granted the unexpected time off because the “City of Richmond and the Public Schools in particular have suffered a great loss in the death of D. Webster Davis,” and he wanted teachers to attend his funeral.²

Daniel Webster Davis represented many roles to white and black Richmonders. He was a beloved teacher to city students and administrators.³ He was “Professor Davis” to hundreds of African American school teachers who attended the annual summer teachers’ institutes across Virginia, North Carolina, and West Virginia. He was “Webster” to close friends and family. For the majority of attendees at his funeral and later at his memorial service at the First African Baptist Church, Daniel Webster Davis was an 1878 graduate of the teacher training program at Richmond Colored Normal and High School, first and foremost.⁴

Beginning in the 1880s, a collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal was developed by the school’s graduates, administrators, and African-American community. Public commemoration, in the form of reunions, anniversary celebrations, and memorial services,

² J.A. C. Chandler to the Principals of the Colored Schools, memorandum, October 27, 1913, Section 6, Daniel Webster Davis Papers, VHS.

³ Daniel Webster Davis taught in the Richmond public schools from 1880 to 1913. He taught at the Navy Hill School until 1883 and then finished his career at the Baker School.

⁴ “Daniel Webster Davis”, Section 8, Daniel Webster Davis papers, VHS. In the mid-1880s, Daniel Webster Davis began to serve as either as a principal instructor or and guest lecturer at the various summer institutes held throughout Virginia, North Carolina and West Virginia. For examples, see Virginia Department of Education, *Virginia School Report, 1889: Nineteenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Virginia with Accompanying Documents, School Year Ending July 31, 1889* (Richmond: J. H. O’Bannon, Superintendent of Public Printing, 1889), 51-73 and Virginia Department of Education, *Virginia School Report, 1890: Twentieth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the Commonwealth of Virginia with Accompanying Documents, School Year Ending July 31, 1890* (Richmond: J. H. O’Bannon, Superintendent of Public Printing, 1891), 142-150; Close friends, classmates, and family often referred to Davis by his middle name. For example, see Julia H. Hayes to Elizabeth S. Smith, October 27, 1913, section 10, Daniel Webster Davis Papers, VHS and Richard Chiles to Elizabeth Davis, October 26, 1913, section 10, Daniel Webster Davis Papers, VHS

sustained this collective memory. Like the emancipation collective memory described by historian David Blight, Richmond Colored Normal's collective memory held a specific function within the African-American community. It served as a political statement which legitimated the training of African-American teachers and African-American education against white critics. Moreover, it gave the African-American community a sense of encouragement for a better future despite the obstacles faced. This conference paper focuses on one form of public commemoration---memorial services. Death played a vital role in sustaining the collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal. Public memorial services of illustrious normal graduates, students, teachers and administrators brought alumni, students, faculty, and the Richmond community together. These services not only celebrated the life of the deceased but they promoted a particular memory of the school. Through an examination of three memorial services, this paper argues that the collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal shaped the struggle for African-American education at the turn of the century.⁵

Established in 1867, Richmond Colored Normal had two objectives. First, it prepared students to become professional teachers in the burgeoning school system for African-American children. Second, it prepared its graduates to become leaders within their respective communities and uplift the race. In leading by example, Richmond Colored Normal graduates fulfilled the school's objectives. They organized and participated in various racial uplift organizations such as literary societies and fraternal orders. Graduates also engaged in activism designed to improve the public schools, such as the "Colored Teachers for Colored Schools" campaign. Through

⁵"Minister Langston in Richmond," *People's Advocate*, September 27, 1879, 2; "Richmond Items," *People's Advocate*, April 20, 1881, 3; "Personal," *People's Advocate*, June 25, 1881, 3; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 1-5; 300-301. In his discussion of the role of emancipation memory at the turn of the century African American community, Blight argued that the civil war memory overlapped with other attitudes toward the past and progress of race the race rhetoric. In total, these strains reflected African Americans determination to forge identities in a society committed to sectional reconciliation and forgetting the claims of legacy and citizenship by African Americans.

these activities, graduates fulfilled their alma mater's dual objectives while allowing for a distinct collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal to emerge among African Americans.⁶

Death played an important role in sustaining the school's collective memory. The death of normal graduates, students, teachers and administrators brought alumni and the community together. City and regional African-American newspapers often noted their passing by recognizing their achievement in and outside of the classroom and praising their commitment toward African-American education. The death of more illustrious graduates and faculty received more elaborate forms of public commemoration with memorial services. Public memorial services, therefore, celebrated the growth of African American education, intellectual achievement, and racial progress made since emancipation. They, like the Emancipation Day celebrations discussed by David Blight, reflected a worldview held by African Americans to "embrace a long view, a faith that at least since 1863 time, God, and the weight of history might be on their side." This worldview aided in their struggle against short-term despair derived from the racial climate. In short, these public memorial services shored up the school's collective memory while promoting confidence to fight for racial progress and intellectual advancement throughout Richmond, the state of Virginia, the South, and the nation. For the rest of my talk, I will focus on the memorial services held for James H. Bowser and Ralza M. Manly and then I will return to the memorial service held for Daniel Webster Davis.⁷

James H. Bowser attended the school during its inaugural year. He briefly taught in the city's schools for African American children before becoming a postal clerk in Richmond.

Although he left the public schools for a position in the post office, he remained committed to

⁶ Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 93-96.

⁷ For examples, see "Death of Miss Carrie Griffin," *Industrial Herald*, July 20, 1883, 3 and "Death of Edward Jones," *Industrial Herald*, July 20, 1883, 3, accessed in the James Hugo Johnston, Sr. Papers, 1865-1914, Special Collection & University Archives, Virginia State University, Petersburg, VA; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 1-5.

African American education through his church involvement and service in the Virginia Educational and Historical Association. His death from consumption at the age of thirty-one shocked the Richmond community in 1881. The African American community commemorated his legacy as an early graduate and community activism.⁸

The African American press bestowed Bowser with coverage of his death and legacy commonly associated with prominent community members and leaders. John W. Cromwell, editor of the *People's Advocate*, former colleague at the Richmond Public Schools, and friend of Bowser, memorialized him in a special article in the newspaper. Cromwell's tribute focused upon his free parentage under slavery, education, and pioneer service in the Richmond public schools and Richmond post office. While acknowledging Bowser's departure from the public schools, Cromwell reminded readers of Bowser's continued devotion to African American education. "Notwithstanding his acceptance of the duties in the postal service, his devotion to the educational interests of his race never flagged," Cromwell explained. "He was one of the foremost in the organization of the Richmond Literary Society, organizer of the Lincoln Lyceum, and afterward of the Virginia Educational and Historical Association of which he was at the time of his death Corresponding Secretary and chairman of the literary and Scholarship committees." Similarly, Peter Woolfolk, editor of the *Virginia Star* and former colleague of Bowser, noted his passing with a front-page editorial, obituary, and coverage of his funeral. Likewise, Woolfolk noted Bowser's high level of education, service as an educator, and continued service to the Richmond community through his religious and secular organizational work. The *Virginia Star* also published glowing tributes sent to the paper by readers, mainly Richmond Colored Normal graduates. For instance, the newspaper published Robert J. Chiles' poem entitled "Cry of the

⁸ J. W. Cromwell, "In Memoriam (James H. Bowser), *People's Advocate*, April 30, 1881, 3.

Loser,” and a special obituary written by a “Friend” in reaction to Bowser’s death. The extensive newspaper coverage reflected the high regard held for Bowser within and outside Richmond. His service on behalf of African American education and racial uplift elevated him to prominence.⁹

In addition, African-Americans held a memorial service for Bowser in Richmond. The service was held at the First African Baptist Church, where Bowser had been a member. Reverend R. Peel Brooks, Charles J. Malord, and George M. Arnold, Esq., and other prominent African-American leaders shared recollections and eulogized Bowser in front of a “large and select audience of cultivated people.” As evidenced by the newspaper coverage, the African American community never saw his memorial service as undeserving or ostentatious. They viewed Bowser as a pioneer in African-American education because of his connections to the school and employment in the city’s public schools. They also regarded him as a “prominent citizen” who combated racial injustice for the benefit of African-Americans with his service in the post office and racial uplift organizations. Hence, the memorial service and the “large and select audience of cultivated people” demonstrated Bowser’s prominent status.¹⁰

Ralza M. Manly also received an elaborate memorial service upon his death in 1897. The white Vermonter’s legacy as the Superintendent of Education for Virginia’s Freedmen’s Bureau, Richmond School Board member, educator, and an early principal of Richmond Colored Normal sparked many emotions and warm memories. As noted by Manly’s widow in 1933, “scores and scores of letters poured in upon me from his old pupils (many of them mine too) expressing their deep appreciation of what he had done for their people.” Graduates and current students

⁹J. W. Cromwell, “In Memoriam (James H. Bowser), April 20, 1881, 3; “Death of James H. Bowser,” *Virginia Star*, April 30, 1881, 1; “Funeral of James H. Bowser,” *Virginia Star*, April 30, 1881, 4; Robert J. Chiles, “The Cry of the Loser,” *Virginia Star*, April 30, 1881, 4; A Friend, “Obituary,” *Virginia Star*, April 30, 1881, 4. Based on the style and form, I believe that Daniel Webster Davis was “A Friend.” However, there is no conclusive evidence to corroborate this assumption.

¹⁰ “Richmond Items,” *People’s Advocate*, May 21, 1881, 2.

organized a special committee in order to devise a memorial service program and develop a plan for future commemorations in the school of their beloved former principal. The committee adopted a series of resolutions detailing how the school would remember Manly. Manly's memory would be invoked continually in the training of future teachers as a model "to follow by example and precept the lesson of his pure and noble life." In addition, the committee commissioned a life-size portrait of Manly to suspend from the walls of Richmond Colored Normal. Recognizing the importance of Manly's legacy to Richmond Colored Normal, these resolutions ensured that Manly would forever be linked with Richmond Colored Normal until the school's closure as well as beyond. As a result of the commemorators' efforts, future commemorations of the school would inadvertently include celebrations of the school's first principal.¹¹

Daniel Webster Davis delivered a poem in Manly's honor at the memorial service. His poem demonstrated the deep regard that former students held for Manly. Manly's efforts at the normal school opened many opportunities for the graduates and resulted in the devotion of Davis and others. The third verse exemplified the degree of the esteem held by normal graduates. Davis exclaimed:

He cannot die while yet a single one
Of dear old Normal lives to tell of years
Of labor great, but greater vict'ries won,
And fruits of seeds so sadly sown in tears,
That gentle, patient voice, though hushed in death,
Still speaks to grateful hearts in tones sublime,...

Davis also recognized Manly's service and unyielding faith in African American education. His legacy was far-reaching as evident in the next verse.

¹¹Mary Patterson Manly to Virginius Johnson, May 12, 1933, letter, VHS; *In memoriam: Ralza Morse Manly, born January 16th, 1822, died, September 16th, 1897. "Requiscat in pace." First Baptist Church, Wednesday evening, November 24, 1897, eight o'clock* (Richmond: Grand Fountain Press, 1897), accessed at VHS.

Far from thy Northern home, that thou didst leave
In years long past, to aid the freedman's child
Whose children's children now thy loss doth grieve.

From his service as the Superintendent of Education for Virginia's Freedmen Bureau to his position on Richmond's School Board to his position as the principal of Richmond Colored Normal, Manly worked tirelessly for the cause of African-American education which yielded success for Davis and countless others. This fact was neither lost upon Davis nor the attendees of the memorial service. As Davis's poem suggested, graduates and the broader African-American community lost a major advocate in their struggle to become a literate people.¹²

Both Bowser's and Manly's memorial services reflected the collective memory of Richmond Colored Normal by the broader African-American community. The services epitomized the community's commitment and value placed upon education for racial uplift. Both events occurred in a prominent African-American church that often hosted graduation ceremonies and other events commemorating Richmond Colored Normal. In both services, commemorators depicted a particular image of the men as well as the school. Bowser's collective memory was of a pioneer to be remembered by future generations. Although he left the teaching profession, the community highlighted his continued and unwavering commitment toward education with his involvement in literary societies. Likewise, commemorators downplayed Manly's flaws in favor of his work in African-American education. As noted in his memorial service, attendees considered Manly as a friend, a mentor, and an ardent promoter of African-American education. They made no mention of his donation of the school to the city instead of establishing a trusteeship among members of the African-American community.

¹² Daniel Webster Davis, "In Memoriam," *In memoriam*, VHS.

Indeed, commemorators remained silent on this unpopular decision.¹³

The minimization of Bowser's and Manly's flaws illustrates the relationship between remembering and forgetting essential to the development and maintenance of a collective memory. In discussing the relationship between remembrance and forgetting, Marita Sturken argued that "memories are created in tandem with forgetting; to remember everything would amount to being overwhelmed by memory. Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory." Memory construction and forgetting, therefore, are intrinsically linked. The act of forgetting becomes a strategic expression of power by those with the authority to shape the meaning of an event. Memory construction and remembrance also reveals the "stakes held by individuals and institutions attributing meaning to the past." Stuken's explanation of the connection between memory, forgetting, and power reflects African-Americans' use of collective memory in the Bowser and Manly memorial services.¹⁴

In 1881 and in 1897, African-American education faced a crisis. In 1881, Virginia's bleak financial situation, uncertainty over the Readjuster political regime, community activism for all-African-American school faculties, and debates over industrial and classical education threatened the African-American public and secondary schools. 1897 saw worsening racial conditions and the Democrats' unsuccessful attempts to overturn the 1868 state constitution that would lead to Jim Crow segregation in Virginia. Moreover, white Richmonders were also

¹³ As president of the Richmond Educational Association, he donated the entire property, the brick building, lot, furniture, and school apparatus valued at \$25,000 to the city. His only condition was the school's continuation as a normal school for African Americans. The city accepted the generous gift and abided by Manly's conditions. This donation firmly cemented the school's legitimacy and continuation. For more information, see "Eighth Annual Report of the School Board and Superintendent of Public Schools of the City of Richmond, VA., for the Scholastic Year 1875-1876," *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending January 31, 1877* (Richmond: C. C. Baughman, City Printer, 1877), 30; Eighth Annual Report of the School Board and Superintendent of Public Schools of the City of Richmond, VA., for the Scholastic Year 1876-1877," *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending January 31, 1878* (Richmond: C. C. Baughman, City Printer, 1878), 222-223. [Due to a printing error, there are two eighth annual reports.]

¹⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7-9.

conducting a memory project devoted to the Lost Cause and removal of African-Americans from the city's public spaces. Thus, commemorators deemed it necessary to remember Bowser's and Manly's achievement and to forget Bowser's departure from the public schools and Manly's flaws.¹⁵

To be sure, a memorial service might not be an appropriate venue for discussions of one's flaws, but the commemorators' silences are revealing. Collective memories rely upon oral transmissions from generation to generation. Silences can become permanent based upon subsequent retellings to new generations. In both Bowser's and Manly's memorial services, the public remembrance and conscious forgetting reaffirmed graduates and community members' past and future commitment to education during the crisis period and provided a strategy to combat any detractors. These services also voiced an alternative memory that recognized African-American achievement and the benefits of Reconstruction. This alternative memory directly countered the memory project that romanticized the Confederacy and the "Lost Cause" while disparaging Reconstruction. Thus, subsequent memorial services, and other forms of commemoration focused on Manly's image as the "father of negro education" and Bowser's pioneer status rather than their flaws. Hence, the conscious forgetting of certain aspects of the school's history and the experiences of the students, teachers, and administrators served an important function but it allowed for the existence of major silences. The conscious forgetting of certain aspects of the school's history and the experiences of the students, teachers, and administrators aided their struggle against critics, like Reverend Hoge. Hence, memorial services continued to find resonance well into the twentieth century as the African American schools and

¹⁵Dailey, 65-72, 162; J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 23-29; Karen L. Cox, *Dixie Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 5, 49-72.

teachers came under increasing attack by white leaders. These services provided black Richmonders with an effective image to counter negative portrayals of African-American intellectual, social, and racial capabilities in an emerging society based on white supremacy.¹⁶

In conclusion, I would like to return to the elaborate memorial service held for Daniel Webster Davis. Through his participation in memorial services for both Bowser and Manly, Davis helped to craft and to sustain Richmond Colored Normal's collective memory. It was only fitting that he too would receive an elaborate memorial service. On November 25, 1913, members of the Dunbar Literary and Historical Society organized the service held at the First African Baptist Church in Richmond. Serving as the Treasurer for the memorial planning committee, O. B. H. Bowser, M.D. ensured that Daniel Webster Davis received the same recognition and accolades as his father, James H. Bowser, did in April 1881.¹⁷

¹⁶ Mary Patterson Manly to Virginius Johnson, May 12, 1933, letter, VHS; Reverend Hoge, "Negro Education in the City [of Richmond] Public Schools," section 46 Hoge family papers, VHS.

¹⁷ "In Memoriam: Dr. Daniel Webster Davis," section 7, Daniel Webster Davis Papers, VHS.

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