

Abstract

This research serves to highlight the life and accomplishments of Thomas Calhoun Walker. He was born into slavery on a small farm in Gloucester County, Virginia, on June 16, 1862. A few months after Walker’s birth, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, but it would take over three years for Walker’s family to be reunited after their emancipation. Following his family’s reunification, Walker was determined to earn an education despite all odds, studying under Booker T. Washington by night until he graduated from the Hampton Institute in 1883. In 1887, Walker became the first black lawyer in Gloucester County. He dedicated his caseload to defending blacks in the Gloucester community, particularly black children who were trapped in the legal system. In 1891, Walker’s influence in his community shifted to politics upon his election to the Gloucester County Board of Supervisors. During the Great Depression, Walker earned his nickname “Black Governor of Virginia” by working alongside the federal government to provide black Virginians with basic needs. Thomas Calhoun Walker died on November 5, 1953, at the age of ninety-one, but his legacy continued.

Introduction

- Thomas Calhoun Walker was born in Gloucester County, Virginia on June 16, 1862, to his parents, Thomas Walker and Grace Herbert Walker.
- He was born into slavery on a farm called Springfield where he lived with his mother, grandmother, and two older brothers while his father and his father’s mother lived together at Roaring Springs, which was a neighboring farm.
- A few months after Walker’s birth, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862.
- In the midst of the Civil War, Gloucester County fought in support of the Confederacy; however, Union troops would soon occupy the county, enforcing the Emancipation Proclamation.
- Although Walker’s master had promised to free his slaves since the county was about to be overrun by Union troops, Baytop chose to relocate his slaves to the Blue Ridge Mountains in order to escape Union troops.

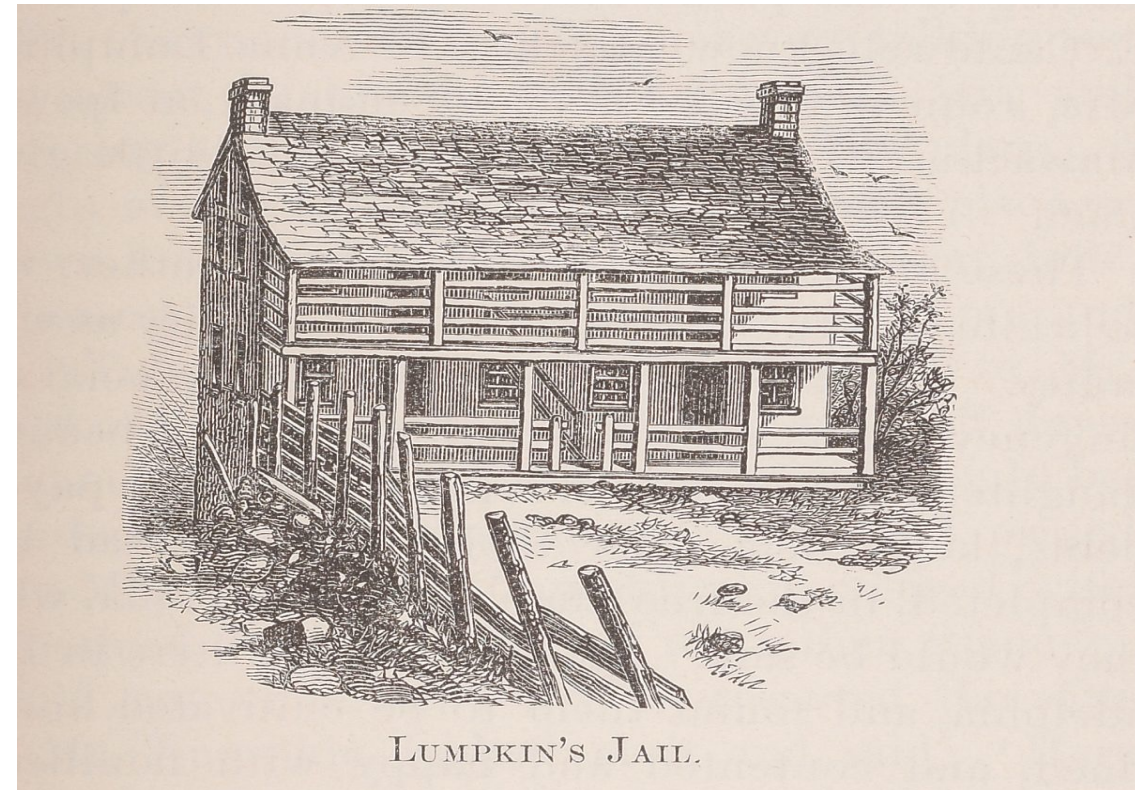
Methods

- Qualitative research was conducted by analyzing a variety of primary and secondary sources.
- Analyzed local newspaper articles from the Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal and the Rappahannock Record memorializing Walker’s life and accomplishments following his death in 1953.
- Consulted Walker’s autobiography entitled *The Honey-Pod Tree: The Life Story of Thomas Calhoun Walker* which was published on July 24, 1958.
- Examined an interview with Thomas Calhoun Walker about his life history conducted by the Works Progress Administration’s Virginia Writers’ Project in 1939.
- Consulted biographical secondary sources from the National Park Service and the Library of Virginia.
- Analyzed current newspaper articles from local news stations honoring Walker’s memory by covering the painting of a mural representing Walker’s life on Main Street Gloucester.
- Examined print resources detailing Gloucester, Virginia’s history through photographs and a biography of Walker’s life.

Emancipation: Walker’s Childhood

- Thomas Calhoun Walker was born into slavery on a farm called Springfield in Gloucester County, Virginia on June 16, 1862.
- Despite being emancipated, Walker’s father spent over three years searching for his family until he finally was reunited with them at Lumpkin’s Jail.
- As a three-year-old boy, Walker recalled watching “his grandmother drop to her knees” and “lift her hands up to heaven and give thanks to God.”
- Following his family’s reunification, Walker lived with Christopher and Josephine Baytop at Springfield, the former slave plantation.
- When Walker reached the age of ten, his father was able to afford the rent for a “two-bedroom shed and kitchen” near Edge Hill of Gloucester Courthouse.

Figure 1



Lumpkin’s Jail: Before the Civil War, Lumpkin’s Jail served as a notorious slave jail, but it was later converted into a shelter for freed slaves that was guarded by Union soldiers.

Law: Walker’s Justice

- After graduation, Walker returned to Gloucester to reopen the Poplars School to educate the black children of the county.
- In 1887, Walker became the first black lawyer in Gloucester County. He dedicated his caseload to defending black children who were trapped in the legal system.
- In 1896, President William McKinley appointed Walker as the first black Collector of the Customs in Virginia.
- Walker started the Gloucester Land and Brick Company to assist black families in purchasing property, largely contributing to Gloucester County’s “highest per capita ratio of black farm ownership in the nation (about 88.5 percent of black families)” in 1930.

Figure 4



Gloucester County Historic Court House: In 1887, Walker began to practice law in the same Court House where he witnessed a fourteen-year-old black girl’s injustice.

Figure 3



Thomas Calhoun Walker (1862-1953)

Education: Walker’s Determination

- Because Walker was needed on the farm to support his family, he attended a few of the makeshift schools for black children sporadically and admittedly only learned his letters and how to read a few words by the age of thirteen.
- In September of 1880, eighteen-year-old Walker worked up the courage to leave home to attend the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute.
- After being denied entrance due to his failing scores on the entrance exams, Walker advocated on behalf of himself and eleven other new students and convinced General Armstrong to allow the boys to remain at the institute.
- Walker worked by day on the campus farm and studied under Booker T. Washington by night until he graduated on June 16, 1883.

Figure 2



The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute: General Samuel Chapman Armstrong founded the institute in 1861. It is now known as Hampton University.

Courage: Walker’s Legacy

- Thomas Calhoun Walker died on November 5, 1953, at the age of ninety-one as the oldest practicing attorney in the state of Virginia.
- In tribute to Walker, Dr. J. M. Ellison remarked, “No task in the interest of people was ever too difficult or the community too remote for the exercise of his courage.”
- He also went on a personal journey towards achieving literacy which is encapsulated in the publication of his autobiography on July 24, 1958.
- To honor Walker’s support for the education of black children, Thomas C. Walker School was built in 1954 to serve the black community of Gloucester until schools were desegregated in 1968.

Figure 5



Mural of Thomas Calhoun Walker’s Life: In 2019, Michael Rosato was commissioned by the Cook Foundation to paint a mural representing Walker’s life story and accomplishments along the side of a building on Main Street Gloucester.

Conclusion

Thomas Calhoun Walker died on November 5, 1953, at the age of ninety-one, but his legacy continued. He was revered for his numerous contributions to education, law, politics, and the Civil Rights Movement. Amidst the generational strongholds and injustices he faced, he impacted the lives of those in his community for decades to come. Walker served as a practicing attorney in the state of Virginia, fulfilling his Christian duty to serve his community as a lawyer until his death. Although he held government positions at the state and federal levels, Walker always maintained his heart for Gloucester, Virginia. This research illuminated an unrecognized figure in Civil Rights history who paved the way for future generations to experience the freedoms he fought for. Within the culture at large, black history is a crucial topic in the modern exploration of social science issues. This research seeks to honor a man who stood on a firm foundation of faith in order to bring integrity, truth, justice, and compassion to his community amidst the trials of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. Not only is Walker a local hero, but he is also a national hero. Walker’s story teaches how one’s faith can shift their perspective on how they view the injustices they have experienced to influence those around them.

Future Work

- Research the pivotal court cases that Walker represented.
- Research the lives and accomplishments of other unrecognized figures in Gloucester, Virginia’s history.
- Research the lives and accomplishments of other unrecognized figures in Virginia’s history who advanced the Civil Rights Movement.
- Research the progression of public education for black children in the state of Virginia and examine Walker’s role in this movement.

References

Primary Sources:

DeHardt, Bill. “T. C. ‘Uncle Tom’ Walker Beloved Attorney-Educator, Buried at Bethel Church.” *Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, vol. 16, no. 48, November 12, 1953.

“Tribute is Paid to Thomas Walker.” *Rappahannock Record*, vol. 61, no. 20, February 24, 1977.

“W. Family Life History (WPA, Virginia Writers’ Project).” Interview by Lucille B. Jayne. *Remaking Virginia: Transformation Through Emancipation*. April 10, 1939.

“Walker Book is Being Published.” *Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, vol. 20, no. 27, July 3, 1958.

“Walker Portrait Presented to Gloucester Court.” *Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal*, vol. 17, no. 20, April 29, 1954.

Walker, Thomas C. *The Honey-Pod Tree: The Life Story of Thomas Calhoun Walker*. New York: John Day Company, 1958.

Secondary Sources:

Deal, John. “Thomas Calhoun Walker (1862-1953).” Library of Virginia. https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/dvb/bio.php?b=Walker_Thomas_Calhoun.

Erickson, Mark J. “Black History in Gloucester: From Slave Child to Folk Hero.” *Daily Press*, February 9, 2013. <https://www.dailypress.com/history/dp-xpm-20130209-2013-02-09-dp-nws-black-history-profiles-2-20130209-story.html>.

“Gloucester Mural Honors Native Who Brought Education and Opportunity for Many.” *WAVY News*, October 23, 2020. <https://www.wavy.com/news/local-news/gloucester-gloucester-mural-honors-native-who-brought-education-and-opportunity-for-many/>.

Sinclair, Caroline B. *Gloucester’s Past in Pictures*. Virginia Beach, VA: Donning Company Publishers, 2005.

“Thomas Calhoun Walker.” National Park Service. <https://www.nps.gov/people/tcwalker.htm>.

Wiatt, Thomas T. *Lawyer Walker: A Biography of Thomas Calhoun Walker*. Morrisville, NC: Lulu Publishing, 2021.

Image Citations:

“Lawyer Thomas Calhoun Walker.” Photograph. Honored Gloucester Residents. <https://www.gloucesterva.info/gallery.aspx?AID=12>.

“Lumpkin’s Jail.” 1895. Book Illustration. Encyclopedia Virginia. <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/7292hpr-47bc39e2cecfaf3/>.

“T. C. Walker Mural.” Mural. The Cook Foundation. <https://www.thecookfoundation.org/tc-walker-mural>.

“The Hampton Institute: The New Building, Virginia Hall.” Engraving. *Remaking Virginia: Transformation Through Emancipation*. <https://www.virginiamemory.com/online-exhibitions/exhibits/show/remaking-virginia/item/577>.

“036-0021 Gloucester County Courthouse Square Historic District.” Photograph. Virginia Department of Historic Resources. <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/036-0021/>.