

“William Obediah Robey”
by
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from
*Essence of a People:
African Americans Who Made Their Lives Anew
in Loudoun County, Virginia, and Beyond*

At the death of William Obediah Robey in 1888, his obituary in the Leesburg edition of *The Washingtonian* read: “The late Rev. William O. Robey . . . was in every respect a most worthy, and highly esteemed man. Modest, and unassuming in his demeanor to all, his influence was always for good, and he exerted all his powers for the welfare of his race. . . . The attendance at his funeral was very large, both by colored and white citizens of the town and neighborhood.”

It might have seemed unlikely in Robey’s youth that a local newspaper might ever print such a glowing encomium about an African American. Life was sharply circumscribed for both free and enslaved people of color in Loudoun County before the Civil War; Robey, however, succeeded against all odds both before the war and afterwards, when he worked for the community as a schoolteacher and minister.

Robey was probably born in 1820 in Fairfax County, Virginia, of parents unknown. In 1834, he was arrested and jailed in Loudoun County on suspicion of being a runaway slave. Fortunately, he was able to prove that he was free. He was then apprenticed to the farmer Edward Hammat, a slaveholder, though perhaps not the kindest of masters: Hammat was an outspoken foe of the illegal but often tolerated practice of allowing the formerly enslaved to remain in Loudoun County after emancipation.

At age 21, Robey finished his apprenticeship and moved to Washington, D.C., to acquire an education. It may have been here that he started attending the Presbyterian Church for, upon his return to Loudoun in 1847, he settled in Leesburg and became a member of the Presbyterian Church on west Market Street. He was the first African American member of the congregation. A few years later, he expressed his desire to become a minister and to preach in Liberia. Church authorities examined his “personal religion, motives and English studies,” and Robey was accepted as a candidate for the ministry by the Winchester Presbytery.

About this time, Robey also married. His choice was Rachel Ann Watson, whose father, William, was a free man and a blacksmith. Upon his father-in-law’s death in 1853, Robey probably took over the smithy. In addition, he bought a good-sized lot on the present corner of Church and North streets and was granted the right-of-way to the pump, as well, on the lot belonging to his neighbor Ryan. The Robeys settled here and had three children, all baptized in the Presbyterian Church.

Life seemed to be going well for Robey: he was a home-owner, an independent tradesman, and the only African American to be licensed as a candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian Church. There were complications with this last issue, however. As a married man and a young father with a second child on the way, the move to Liberia might no longer have been attractive or possible. But had he been ordained, Robey would not have been able to preach in Virginia because African Americans were by law prohibited from holding large gatherings without whites present. The church seemed conflicted on the issue: The Winchester Presbytery transferred Robey to the Washington Presbytery, perhaps to avoid ordaining him. Then in 1857, tragedy struck: Both Rachel Robey and the couple's younger son died of consumption. Robey was left with two small children. He never remarried, and his ambition to rise to the clergy appeared, for a time at least, forgotten.

After the Civil War, however, when equality of the races seemed to be an attainable dream, Robey resumed his pursuit to become an ordained minister. The Leesburg church had by that time been merged into the Rappahannock Presbytery, which licensed him as a preacher and designated him its "missionary to the African Race among us," work for which he was paid by the General Assembly's Committee of Domestic Missions. Robey preached in Methodist and Baptist churches around the county under the supervision of the Presbytery, and he reported regularly back to that body on his work. In 1867, Robey became a licensed preacher, bonded by the Commonwealth of Virginia "to perform the duties of his office as a minister of the Gospel of the Presbyterian Church." This meant that he could perform marriages, even though he had performed the first one, months earlier, on June 27, 1866, when he married Willis Whitney and Annie Brinton. Over the next fourteen years, he performed and registered 156 marriages.

Unfortunately, his own church in Loudoun County had few African American members, so, in 1867, Robey accepted a request from trustees of Leesburg's Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church to become this new African American church's minister. Mt. Zion had its origins in Leesburg's Old Stone church, a congregation that had been mixed race but segregated, with blacks sitting upstairs. After the War, black members engaged Robey to lead their flock.

In spite of this appointment, he continued to seek full ordination from the Presbyterian Church, which continued to place roadblocks in his path. For example, the Presbytery examined Robey in 1868, but finding him to be "too Methodist" in his theology, told Robey he needed further training in Calvinism. Robey accepted the stricture, and Jonah W. Lupton, his pastor in Leesburg, became his tutor. Years passed in which the Presbytery committees that supervised him "reported satisfaction with his preaching gifts," but failed to agree on ordination. Finally, Robey's patience ran out, and he asked if "the Presbytery would be embarrassed by an application to ordain a colored man to full work of the ministry." The Presbytery denied the charge, but Robey had had enough. In 1872, a bishop of the Washington Conference ordained him an elder in the Methodist church. He remained Mt. Zion's minister until 1879.

Robey was not only a minister; he also was a teacher, working in the Freedmen's Bureau's schools in Loudoun County. Of course, we must be clear that the Bureau never had enough funds to pay teachers' salaries, build buildings, or purchase materials for all the schools that were needed in the South. The lack was often supplied by Northern benefactors, and indeed Leesburg's first African American school was funded by the Philadelphia-based Society of Friends Association. Robey's home, on the corner of Church and North streets, became the second Freedmen's Bureau School in Leesburg in 1866, and he became its teacher. Except for a small amount in rent, the school was fully supported by Leesburg's African American community. Robey initially had approximately twenty students, of whom sixteen were over the age of sixteen. The school grew rapidly, and by December 1868, there were forty students in attendance.

Robey's commitment to teaching continued even after his school closed in 1869. When Loudoun's public school for African American children opened on west North Street, he became a teacher of the lower grades. It's not known when Robey was hired—there are no extant Loudoun County school records before 1882—but he taught in Leesburg until 1888.

When William O. Robey died in 1888 he was buried next to his wife in the Presbyterian cemetery. Unfortunately their graves disappeared when the church had W. N. Hall build an extension to the building. But his legacy, as a pastor, an educator, and a tireless soldier in the battle for freedom and dignity for African Americans, lives on.