

William Syphax: Community Leader

by EVELYN REID SYPHAX



William Syphax, the oldest son and second child of Charles and Maria Carter Syphax, was born in Alexandria County, Virginia at the Arlington Estate on April 4, 1825.

While an infant, William was manumitted with his mother and elder sister, Elinor, in 1826. Living in a family of semi-freedom, he was educated in the private schools of Alexandria and Washington, D.C.

William's mother, Maria, was given seventeen and a half acres of land on the southwest corner of the Arlington Estate by George Washington Parke Custis, and she lived there until her death.¹ From November 21, 1863 to January 10, 1864 the sale of the Arlington Estate of 1,170 acres was purchased at public auction by the federal government for \$26,100 and the cemetery began May 13, 1864.

There was no deed, record, will, or document of any kind to prove the right of ownership of the 17 acres by the Syphax family, although they had lived there for over fifty years.

William came to his mother's rescue. Through his efforts the matter was brought to the attention of Congress and with little delay and no debate the Bill for the Relief of Maria Syphax was passed. On May 16, 1866, Senator Harris from the Committee on Private Land Claims, reported a bill (S. No. 321) for the relief of Maria Syphax.²

On June 8, 1886 the bill first passed the House, then the Senate on June 11 and was signed by President Andrew Johnson the following day.³

Very little information has been recorded about the early life of William. As a man, he was of remarkable stature. He was six feet tall with broad shoulders, broad forehead, high cheekbones, straight nose, thin lips, and light brown skin.⁴

Deeply interested in the education of Negro people, he left no stones unturned which meant proportionate opportunities for public education.

In 1851 he was appointed to a position in the office of the Secretary of the Interior, ultimately reaching the post of messenger in the department, open to a few Negro men at that time. In this position he came into contact with many government officials who acquired deep respect for his abilities and

¹ Newspaper clipping, June 1886. Name of paper and exact date missing. Syphax family files.

² *Congressional Globe*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., p. 2612.

³ *Ibid*, p. 3126.

⁴ *The Washington Post*, May 18, 1878.

integrity. He was appointed to the Board of Trustees of Colored Public School in 1868 and served as chairman of the group for two years, 1868-1870, and as treasurer for one year, 1870-1871.⁵

He became active in many movements for racial and civic advancement and was responsible for much of the foundation of the Washington D.C. schools for Negro children.

In November of 1870 he organized the Preparatory High School for Colored Youth in the basement of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church which became Dunbar High School of the District of Columbia in 1916. He named and supervised the building of the Abraham Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, and Charles Sumner Schools.

Throughout his life, William Syphax's interest was enlisted in a whole range of other civic affairs: he was one of the founders of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, in which he served as a deacon for twenty years; he sponsored and secured incorporation of the Columbian Harmony Cemetery in 1889; and he was active in the Civil and Statistical Association, founded in 1850 for the educational, moral, and financial advancement of Negroes in the area.

William Syphax was not blind to the shortcomings of his own people. In a circular to the Negroes of Washington and Georgetown on September 10, 1868, he urged them to cooperate with the school trustees in their efforts to render the schools as efficient as possible to "the great end for which they were established."⁶ Unlike others of his race, he advocated integration of public schools rather than maintaining the more costly and unrealistic philosophy of "separate but equal" education.

A man of dauntless courage and unwavering integrity, he dared to demand what was due his race, fearing no man regardless of position or color. Personal desires and ambitions were delegated to the background, and his people were first with him. He took issue with the greatest minds of his day and did not hesitate to expose publicly those whose intentions were dishonorable.⁷

William Syphax was so active and prominent in the political, social, and educational affairs of his time that his domestic side may be considered of minor significance though such is not the case. He married Mary M. Browne of Scotch, Cherokee Indian, and Free Negro blood, who was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Her nephew, Hugh M. Brown, was the educator for whom Browne Junior High School in Washington, D.C. was named. Three children were born of this union: Maria B. Syphax, William B. Syphax, and Mary M. Syphax (Gibson). The latter was a teacher in the Washington schools, 1886-1895; and the principal of the Children's House at Tuskegee Institute, 1903-1905. The only living direct descendant of William is Mary Gibson Huntley, his granddaughter, a former teacher of French in the former Dunbar High School of Washington, D.C. (demolished June, 1977)

It is reasonable to assume that the saddest time in the life of William Syphax was the death of his mother, Maria, in 1886 at the age of eighty-three. Her funeral was held at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Arlington and was largely attended. Six grandsons served as pallbearers.⁸

⁵ M.B. Goodwin, "Schools and Education of the Colored Population in the District," US Department of Education: *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1871), p 193-300.

⁶ Circular, Sept. 10, 1868.

⁷ E. Delores Preston, Jr. "William Syphax," *Journal of Negro History* (1935).

⁸⁸⁸ Newspaper clipping, Name of paper and date missing. Syphax family files.

William's brother, John, was the first Negro from Alexandria County to be elected to the Virginia House of Delegates, 1874-1875. He was later treasurer and Justice of the Peace in Alexandria County, 1875-1879.⁹

Austin's brother, Austin, was elected Justice of the Peace for Arlington Magisterial District on June 28, 1875.¹⁰ His sister, Elinore S. Reeves, directed sewing for the contrabands in Freedman's Village shortly after the Civil War.

Death came to William Syphax on June 15, 1891, leaving a wife, two daughters, and one son. Funeral services were held at his residence, 1641 P. Street, NW and his remains were buried at Harmony Cemetery.¹¹

William Syphax had given the best within him for over half a century. His achievements were not forgotten for on October 31, 1902, a school on Half Street, between N and O Streets, SW was dedicated and named in his honor. It stands as a fitting memorial to his life and work. At the exercises his long-time friend, William H.A. Wormley, formerly presented the school with a picture of William Syphax, which was accepted on behalf of the school by Dr. W. S. Montgomery who at that time was the Superintendent of Schools.¹²

⁹ *Negro Office Holders in Virginia, 1865-1895* (Norfolk: Luther P. Jackson, 1946) p. 41.

¹⁰ Another brother, Ennis, was the grandfather of the author's husband, Archie Syphax.

¹¹ *Washington Star*, June 17, 1891; *The Washington Post*, June 18, 1891.

¹² *Washington Evening Times*, October 31, 1902.