

Shenandoah County Historical Society, November 2009 Program

Abolitionist George Rye Revealed

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Who was George Rye? In brief, he was a Shenandoah County saddler who did well in business and in politics. Within his life lies a story concerning the involvement of the Abolitionist Movement in Shenandoah County from the 1830s through 1870, a movement whose program advocated the immediate emancipation of all slaves, the ending of racial segregation and the ending of racial discrimination.

From the beginning of Dunmore/Shenandoah County in 1772, slavery was not acceptable to some citizens. Usually for religious reasons, they chose neither to buy nor to own laborers sold in Virginia from Africa. When some Quakers purchased slaves, their church declared that the blacks must be manumitted. Shenandoah County did not encourage emancipation or manumission; in fact, Minutes of Shenandoah County Court, state that when Jackson Allen, a Quaker, freed his Negroes, he was summoned to Court on 28 September 1776 to show cause why they should not be sold, according to an act of assembly. The county did not know what to do with free people of color and it appears, began to ignore many of the Black Laws relating to slaves and free Negroes passed by the General Assembly that they did not want to enforce, specifically the removal of emancipated persons from Virginia soil within one year after receiving their freedom.

The abolitionist movement, to emancipate all slaves, began during the American Revolution and continued through the 1850s. Some abolitionists supported the American Colonization Society, formed in 1817, to send African Americans back to Africa rather than to emancipate them in this country. The American Colonization Society advanced gradual emancipation and emigration of blacks to Africa. *The Woodstock Herald*, 28 January 1818,

states: "The Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color held its first anniversary in the City of Washington in the Chamber of the House of Representatives. Honorable Bushrod Washington presided over thirteen important men, including John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia." When *The Woodstock Herald*, 27 May 1818 issue arrived to subscribers, it informed them that the American Colonization group had left London for Sierra Leone in February. In 1822, the American Colonization Society established a colony on the west coast of Africa, a colony that became known as Liberia in 1847.

Throughout the Valley continued interest in colonization for African Americans received the support of some slaveholders and some women, who signed petitions urging the General Assembly to finance the effort. Following Nat Turner's failed rebellion in 1831, Virginia slaveholders feared a larger uprising. In Black Laws of Virginia, June Purcell Guild shows that in 1833, the General Assembly appropriated \$18,000. per year for five years to encourage the transportation and support of free persons of color who wanted to emigrate to Liberia or to the west coast of Africa (108). In 1850, the General Assembly appropriated \$30,000. for the removal of free persons of color to Africa (Guild 139), and three years later appropriated another \$30,000. for five years to remove free Negroes from the Commonwealth (Guild 119). According to electronic edition of *The African-American Mosaic*, a Library of Congress Exhibition, by 1867 more than 5,700 emigrants had been shipped to the African colony, although many who returned to Africa soon died of disease. The American Colonization Society failed to solve the problem of what to do with the free Negroes. Although active support for Liberia ended in 1911-12, the society was not "legally dissolved" until 1964 (The American Colonization Society: A Register of its Records in the Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division 1964 3).

With impetus from Northern preachers, newspaper editors and writers for immediate emancipation during the 1830s and 1840s, abolitionism turned political and religious. Hostility between abolitionists and colonizationists drove the groups apart after William Lloyd Garrison, publisher, expressed his view that colonization was a plot by the slaveholders to perpetuate slavery (Robert Hewitt, Where the River Flows 142-147).

Division of the Methodist and the Baptist occurred when abolitionists actively tried to influence congregations during the 1840s. Reformed, Lutheran, and Presbyterian split from their northern church organizations, and accepted a paternalistic attitude toward slavery (Hewitt 154-157). In opposite belief, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, Baptist and Methodist churches considered holding slaves to be sinful. Census records show that a number of Lutheran pastors held slaves: Rev. Peter Muhlenberg, Rev. Anders Rude, Rev. Samuel S. Schmucker, and Rev. John P. Cline. Neither Henkel nor Stirewalt pastors, who organized many Lutheran churches in Shenandoah County, bought or sold people of color, but they hired free African Americans and paid equal wages to everyone. In his missionary travels, Rev. Paul Henkel baptized a number of slaves held by Germans he visited, some of whom saved his life from swollen waters. By 1861, not only churches but also families throughout the county had split along abolitionist lines. Thus abolition became the great divider of families and churches, even without influence from the active abolitionist movement that appeared in Shenandoah County through the person of George Rye.

George Rye (19 February 1810 - 24 April 1890) first appeared in Shenandoah County Minute Book 1816-1822 on Nov. 12: "George Rye, son of Thomas Rye, is bound by Overseer of the Poor District #2 to James Allen to learn the trade of saddlemaking." Census records indicate that he came from Maryland to be a saddler, but the Minutes of Shenandoah County Court, 9 March 1830, show that George Rye, orphan of Thomas Rye, over the age of 14, chose Samuel Fetzer as his guardian. According to Marvin Vann, Shenandoah County, Virginia: A Study of the 1860 Census with Supplemental Data, Rye married Catherine Fravel (18 July 1813 - 6 March 1888) on 2 October 1833, at age 23 (l. 174). Their marriage just three years after Nat Turner's Rebellion and two years after Virginia came close to approving the gradual abolition of slaves at the close of the Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-32, George and Catherine must have decided, as had the rest of Shenandoah County citizens, where they stood regarding abolition of slaves. But establishing his business and becoming known in the county were important matters to George Rye. Young Rye might have acquired ideas from Maryland, his father or Samuel Fetzer before he developed his own beliefs concerning the abolition of slaves.

The name of George Rye appears in *The Woodstock Herald*, 16 December 1836, in an advertisement for his new establishment, a saddler shop at Columbia Furnace, where “he will constantly keep a good supply of saddles, bridles, harness &c., which he will sell at moderate prices. All kinds of country produce will be received in exchange for work.” Rye’s willingness to barter for goods suggests that he knew the people with whom he desired business and whom he would try to convince that abolition of slaves was necessary. Yet the next year George Rye was summoned to Court for his abolitionist activities:

The Minutes of Shenandoah County Court, 11 September 1837, read:

At a court called and held at the Court House of Shenandoah County on Monday the 11th day of September, 1837, for the examination of George Rye, charged with feloniously writing, printing, and causing to be written and printed a persuasive writing with the intent of advising, enticing and persuading persons of color within the Commonwealth of Virginia to make insurrection and to rebel and denying the right of masters to property in their slaves and inculcating the duty of resistance to such right contrary to the form of statute in such case made and provided, present Absalom Rinker, Wright Gatewood, Phineas Orndorff, George Grandstaff, Philip Stickley, Philip Pitman and Henry Cullers, Gentlemen Justices.

The prisoner was set to the bar in custody of the Jailer. Alexander Anderson appeared as his counsel. Sundry witnesses were sworn and the matter fully heard whereupon the Court was of the opinion that the prisoner George Rye ought to be tried in the Circuit Superior Court of Law and Chancery for this county for the offense aforesaid.... [signed] A. Rinker, W. Gatewood, George Grandstaff, Phineas Orndorff, Philip Stickley, Philip Pitman, Henry Cullers.

Gatewood, Grandstaff, Stickley, Pitman, and Cullers were slaveholders. This is indeed a strange Shenandoah County Court case, the only one I have found that was deferred for over two years; in fact, the case was continued for three and a half years until it was finally settled. On 7 October 1839, the Minutes of Shenandoah County Court read: “George Rye not prepared to make his declaration continuance until next court.” Yet nothing concerning George Rye appeared in the next month’s Court Minutes, nor the next.

Finally, on 13 July 1840, the Court Minutes record that the case of George Rye was fully heard. “The Court is of the opinion that the prosecution be dismissed and discharged against George Rye. Ordered for the cost.” Something had changed, possibly his overt abolitionist activities, though surely not his abolitionist views, which may have been responsible soon after for the dissolving of his business partnership. William A. Link, in Roots of Secession, Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia, states that in 1848 George Rye had entered politics as one leader of Virginia’s “tiny” Free Soil Party (166).

George Rye’s version of the Court case appeared thirty years later in his published “Address to the Citizens of Shenandoah County, Virginia” delivered in 1867, in which he admits to the people of the county that he did write “a paper against the institution of slavery” in February, 1837, but he had kept and not distributed it (Chapin Library, Williams College 2). Basing his actions upon his beliefs and values, Rye, in the address, repeats and upholds the content of his former writing, that began by asking, “Is slavery right or wrong?” Furnishing examples of the rights of man from Christianity and the Ten Commandments, the Constitution of the United States and the history of Greece, Rye concludes that reason called for the abolition of slavery. Further, he said, men of principle and truth who held no slaves could not be expected to fight for the continuance of slavery (Rye 3). His account of the Court accusations offers insight:

God in his wisdom by the combination of circumstances overruled my request to conceal this writing, and it brought about a prosecution for felony, based upon this writing; and so heinous was the crime considered at that day that bail was refused me and I was forced to take my lodging in the jail, from whence I was brought to this bar but to plead “not guilty” to the charge. All the power of slaveholding influence was brought to bear to insure my conviction; and the excitement produced by that prosecution has had no duplicate in this county from that day to the present, for it was the first blow struck here, at the white man’s liberty. Happily they failed in this prosecution, but gained one end of the object they had in view, viz.: to intimidate others. But however abject others have become, in surrendering their right to read, to argue, and to know the policy of church and state, I am proud to know that I have sustained my rights in this regard, through three prosecutions and

volumes of slander and abuse ( 4 ).

Clearly the lines of slaveholders vs. the abolitionist were drawn into conflict. Rye believed friends of liberty recognized that the Negro, a man, had been denied his inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness by their oppressors, and that the slave deserved restoration of his rights, respectability and an education (3). Although challenged on these beliefs by the county slaveholders and vigilantes, Rye continued to live and work in Shenandoah County. His life, however, underwent changes.

*The Sentinel of the Valley*, 9 September 1841, informed the public that the firm of George Rye and Daniel Burner in the saddling business had been dissolved by mutual consent. Rye did not give up his saddlery business. Knowing that everyone needed equipment for their valuable horses, he advertised! His saddlery business must have prospered, and he moved to Woodstock. According to John W. Wayland, History of Shenandoah County, Rye became a charter member of the Shenandoah Lodge No. 32, I.O.O.F. [Independent Order of Odd Fellows] on 15 March 1847 ( 291), revealing his acceptance into Woodstock society.

Although Lake's 1885 Atlas shows George Rye's homes in Edinburg at 403 and 411 Water Street, with his tannery business adjacent to it ( 20 ), his Woodstock business, opposite the store of Clower and Golladay, carried on saddling, harness, and trunk-making. *The Tenth Legion*, 13 July 1848 states: "He always has on hand a full assortment of saddles, bridles, trunks, carpet bags, carriage and buggy harness, saddlebags, collars and every description of waggon harness."

A year later, *The Tenth Legion*, 14 June 1849 announced: "Mr. George Rye, Woodstock, to take a trip West and will attend to collection of claims in the States of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, etc. upon reasonable terms." Although no direct abolitionist connection has yet been established as to the purpose of this trip, it undoubtedly helped to broaden Rye's education and his influence as a traveled man. Quite probably Rye heard speeches by abolitionist Joshua R. Giddings to the Ashtabula County Anti-Slavery

Society at Ashtabula, Ohio, on his trip West. In his “Address to the Citizens of Shenandoah County,” Rye pauses for homage:

Joshua R[eed] Giddings. Let us stop at his tomb to do him reverence. Ah! well do I remember the old chief of Ashtabula. For liberty most gallantly he fought. The print of his moccasin was always in advance of the time, and his war whoop electrified a continent. In ambush he never fought; but in the open field, with his face to the foe, and his plume licking the rays of the sun, he wielded his battle axe. He drew from his quiver the thunderbolts of truth, and one by one the giants of slavery fell. Peace to his ashes. Yes, here in Woodstock they used to call me Giddings, in derision.

It is clear that George Rye knew Giddings well, and that he was making national connections with other abolitionists. Possibly the Rye family had abolitionist beliefs before they arrived in Shenandoah County. The dates and locations of Joshua Reed Giddings, 1795-1864, and George Rye, 1810-1890, indicate that Rye could have been a student of Giddings during Giddings’ teaching years in Ashtabula, Ohio.

James Brewer Stewart, in Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery, asserts that Giddings, who won nine consecutive terms to Congress, received praise from the Ashtabula County Anti-Slavery Society for his “manly and independent stand” against slavery (85). Voters from Ohio’s Western Reserve gave Giddings a mandate from them to Congress to oppose slaveholding, violations of civil rights and the planter class (85). Giddings thus continued to be an easily accessible mentor for George Rye as Rye leapt into the national political scene.

On 12 April 1856, *The New York Times* listed the name of George Rye as a member of the National Committee of the Philadelphia National Convention. The National Committee, composed of twenty-one men from twenty-one states, had been appointed at Pittsburgh in February 1856. The National Committee issued a circular under the Republican name at Washington, D.C. in March, a circular that expressed their views opposing slavery in all states and in the Free Territories. The circular called for the first

National Convention of Republicans in Philadelphia on 17 June 1856. Fifty years later Addison B. Burk, in Golden Jubilee of the Republican Party; the Celebration in Philadelphia, June 17, 18 and 19, 1906, remembered George Rye, Virginia, as an organizational member of the National Committee and the first National Convention of Republicans ( 7-8 ).

On 19 June 1856 George Rye and John C. Underwood, an antislavery activist from Clarke County, attended the first National Republican Convention in Philadelphia, and both spoke harshly against slavery in Virginia to the convention . When newspapers condemned their attacks against slavery in Virginia and its spread to new Western lands as “obnoxious principles,” people were outraged (William A. Link, Roots of Secession 166). Local communities in Clarke and Shenandoah counties took offense at remarks that they said had insulted and libeled them. On July 4th, 1856 in Woodstock, Rye was burned in effigy, and an “indignation” meeting was held three days later. William A. Link writes: “At the Woodstock indignation meeting, the saddler boldly walked into the meeting and took a seat at the rear of the room, in plain view of the entire audience” (Link 166). Samuel C. Williams, secretary of the meeting, called Rye “a viper in their bosoms” as Williams attacked abolitionists and Black Republicans. Although the meeting resolved that Rye should be “cast out ... by the lynch law, if necessary,” George Rye, an open opponent of slavery, did not leave Woodstock and was not harmed (166). John C. Underwood, however, moved to the North to avoid being ejected from Clarke County amid threatening rumors of tar and feathering by the Vigilance Committee there. These two men, Rye and Underwood, were destined to become leaders in Virginia’s government immediately after the Civil War.

At some point George Rye had begun a political course of action that established him in the Shenandoah County Court system as a Gentleman Justice. Minutes of Shenandoah County Court, June 1855, read: “George Rye acknowledged himself to be indebted to the Commonwealth of Virginia the sum of one thousand dollars to be levied of his respective goods and chattels, lands and tenements.” Could this have been a security bond? One year later, on August 1856, the Minutes said: “George Rye was paid for Juror

services during the present term.” Rye undoubtedly had read law under a lawyer, judge or clerk of the court in preparation for work at Court. By 1867, he signed his name “George Rye, Esq.” to his published “Address to the Citizens of Shenandoah County.” In it, he claims to have been “to the manor born” rather than a graduate of the Virginia University. However, “Esq.” may have been more of an honor because of his work in court rather than his work as an attorney. George Rye’s “Address to The Citizens of Shenandoah County” leaves no doubt of his able use of language and outstanding writing ability.

Letters mentioning George Rye in religious abolitionist activity in Shenandoah County appeared in The Tenth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association and Proceedings, the Annual Meeting held at Fulton, Oswego County, New York, 1856. A letter written by the Rev. James S. Davis, who had preached on the moral and religious teaching of the Gospel on the slavery question in his native Virginia, appears in the report:

I preached nine sermons in Virginia, two directly on the subject of slavery, both in the same place, a schoolhouse, half a mile from Woodstock, Shenandoah Co. I spent a little more than two weeks in the village and vicinity; found many anti-slavery men, who do not know how to make their influence felt. They are not, I think, ripe for forming a free-church; but if a suitable man be found to preach in the churches of other denominations where they could be had, and if not, in school-houses, I think he might reach a great many people. At least a dozen preaching places could be found within a circuit of ten miles diameter.

Very few slaves are owned in the country. Most of the inhabitants of German origin move directly from Pennsylvania. They do their own work; feel the constraint which slavery lays upon them; are becoming disgusted with the Democratic party; never heard a sermon against slavery, yet can’t believe the system is right. I preached three times for the minister of the German Reformed Church. He is absorbed in the church question, and knows nothing about slavery -- attempted to defend it from the Bible, in conversation, but soon gave up the attempt.

I attended a quarterly meeting of the United Brethren. Saw several ministers; they think slavery sinful, but told me explicitly, that it would be unwise to preach against it. I preached once by invitation. I preached twice at a school-house, three miles from Woodstock. A slaveholder walked two miles to hear the sermon on Sabbath. He

had horses, but said he was afraid Mr. Rye and myself would not go home with him if he rode; we were walking.

At night I preached to a large congregation in Edinburgh, a small village, five miles from Woodstock. The congregation was large. Mr. Rye is a noble man. He devotes his time to the work. May God bless him. I hope to write again soon (69).

In this foregoing letter Rev. Davis assesses the local scene for possible abolitionist activity and contrasts George Rye with other Shenandoah County anti-slavery men, who feared giving out-spoken support for the abolition of slaves. Another letter from Rev. Davis identifies George Rye as an abolitionist and explains the active, forthright role Rye was playing within religious groups. Davis writes:

I think that I was brief in reporting the results of my tour [from Kentucky] to Virginia. Mr. George Rye is a reliable out-and-out abolitionist. For eighteen years he has been endeavoring to place himself in circumstances such as will enable him to give his time and interest to the anti-slavery movement. His wife is a kind woman, and would sympathize and co-operate with him. They have no children. There are other substantial men here who are interested in the anti-slavery question.

Mr. Rye proposed that I should go to Virginia again, and call upon every minister in the vicinity, stating frankly that my object is to procure the abolition of slavery, while at the same time I shall strive to develop in the church a symmetrical Christian character. That, with this understanding, I preach to their congregations; but if not agreeable to them, then preach in school-houses, dwellings, &c. I felt the imperative necessity of sustaining the churches to which I now minister, and therefore told Mr. Rye that these churches must be supplied before I could come (The Tenth Annual Report 69).

The Tenth Annual Report of the American Missionary Association further notes that, during 1856, an attempt was made to drive Mr. Rye and a Mr. Underwood from Virginia on account of their decided opposition to slavery (70). These writings leave no doubt as to whether or not George Rye was an abolitionist or as to whether or not he was working with John J. Underwood, Clarke County, to promote equality and freedom in Shenandoah County.

During the 1840's Rye's business appears to have prospered. The 1850 U. S. Census shows that three free African Americans were with George Rye and Catherine: Erasmus Fetzer, age 14; Sarah J. Marshall, age 15; and Curtis Neek, age 24, confectionist. The 1860 U.S. Census shows George Rye as a farmer with \$4,800. property and \$700. personal property. With George and Catherine Rye were two free people of color: Rebecca Waller, age 22, an house girl, and John Moten, age 12, a mulatto. By 1880 Martha Ship, age 25, assisted the Rye household. Rye's employment of free people of color reveals his economic aid to the African Americans in Shenandoah County as he worked politically to gain their liberty.

In 1860 George Rye again joined John C. Underwood in organizing the Virginia Republican Convention in Wheeling to elect delegates to the Republican National Convention in Chicago, the convention that would nominate Abraham Lincoln for president. Strong support for the Union in northwest Virginia was organized in 1861 by two summer Unionist conventions in Wheeling. William A. Link, in Roots of Secession, states that after Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861, a Unionist breakaway government organized the new Unionist state, authorized as West Virginia in 1863 ( 251-252 ).

At the beginning of the Civil War, George Rye, age 51, had already entered politics as a Black Republican, who became known statewide. *The Daily Dispatch* [Richmond], 16 November 1860, wrote: "A meeting was held at Woodstock, Shenandoah County, on Monday last, at which, after speeches by Gen. Williams and Hon. Mr. Harris, resolutions were adopted in favor of calling a State Convention, to consider federal relations, and requesting the Lincoln voters in that county to emigrate to a free State. It is said summary action [meaning performed quickly and without a hearing] will soon be taken in the case of George Rye, Republican elector, who is a resident in that county" ( 2 ).

The following week, "Singlesticks," a pseudonym of a correspondent from Harrisonburg, wrote to *The Daily Dispatch* on 20 November 1860, following the election of Abraham Lincoln:

In our neighboring county, Shenandoah, Lincoln received thirteen votes. This county is the residence of George Rye, the Black Republican Elector for this district. A letter I have just seen, from Woodstock, says: "The greatest indignation exists here against George Rye, and you need not be surprised to hear of his ejection from the county before many days" ( 2).

Four months later the editor of the *Republican Vindicator* [Staunton], on 22 March 1861, believed that George Rye would be named the new U.S. Marshall for the Western District of Virginia. Though the appointment never came, and the Western District was not created until 1871, the Staunton newspaper's mention of his name reveals the prominence that George Rye had attained in the Valley. Although many people in Shenandoah County desired George Rye to leave the county, he continued to live in Edinburg. Richard Lowe, "The Freedmen's Bureau and Local White Leaders in Virginia," The Journal of Southern History, August 1998, says: "He had spent most of the war in the northern states or in Union-occupied areas of Virginia" (467-8). Although because of his service on the Shenandoah County Court, I cannot verify that he left Shenandoah County, I do conclude that George Rye did not fight for the Confederacy. Further, Lowe found that Rye became "one of the founders of the antebellum Republican party of Virginia." Rye appears to have been part of the northwestern Virginians who aggressively criticized the politics of slavery and according to William Link, moved the region "in a direction different from the rest of Virginia in the years immediately preceding secession" (Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia ( 9 ).

Because George Rye was still active in the Shenandoah County Court, he was well positioned for his ascent in government after the surrender of the Confederacy. On 10 July 1865, the final entry of the Minutes of Shenandoah County Court appears: "George Rye was elected presiding Justice, voting verra voce for him at court. Rye was declared duly elected. Present too: Joseph S. Irvin, Jacob A. Hottel, John Richard, Hiram Hannan, Silas Munch, John H. Zirkle, James L. Miller, William Liggett, Isaac Bowrer, William Whissler, Ephriam Baker, John D. Boehm, John Sager, John Keissler, Nathaniel Markley, Michael S. Bair." It appears that George Rye was elected Judge Rye by voice vote of sixteen

Shenandoah County men rather than by Virginia appointment. *The Shenandoah Herald*, 8 October 1866, reported Rye's presence in the 1866 October Court Session.

One wonders whether these aforementioned men had been Union men throughout the war. At least, most were not large slave holders; only two of them held one slave each, according to the 1860 U.S. Census. But Rye's Radical political consciousness was once again disapproved by some in Shenandoah County. Richard Lowe, "The Freedmen's Bureau and Local White Leaders in Virginia," Journal of Southern History, reports that in 1866 local bullies beat him with a cowhide strap; notwithstanding, George Rye attended the 1867-1868 Virginia Constitutional Convention, where he was elected secretary (467). This responsibility, an historic one, led to the enactment of the new 1870 Virginia Underwood Constitution, named after Judge John Curtis Underwood, the Radical Republican president of the Constitutional Convention from Clarke County. Whereas William A. Link, Roots of Secession, Slavery, and Politics in Antebellum Virginia, points out that Underwood and Rye had themselves helped to organize the Virginia Republican Convention at Wheeling in 1860 (165, 204), Richard Lowe in the Journal of Southern History emphasizes that to be nominated for the 1867-68 Virginia Constitutional Convention, the Freedmen's Bureau of the United States Government had recommended "men of the first respectability and who have the confidence of both the whites and the freedmen" ( 457). George Rye was chosen.

This 1867-1868 Virginia Constitutional Convention of 105 men, just under one fourth African American, met in Richmond from 3 December 1867 to 17 April 1868. John J. Dinan, in The Virginia State Constitution, cites the convention's tasks: securing equal rights for African Americans, defining the relationship between state and federal governments, making changes to governing institutions, and preparing an oath clause and disenfranchisement clause, that were both later defeated in a referendum (14-15). For George Rye, the responsibility of being the secretary of this convention demanded abilities in language, especially the written language, in a new atmosphere in which the slaveholders had lost all of their power. Only in his published "Address to the Citizens of

Shenandoah County, Virginia” and in his having written the 1837 abolitionist paper have these abilities appeared, abilities that one would not have supposed a saddler to possess. Yet, many men of the period, lacking access to a college or university education, developed and used the abilities of reading, writing and speaking to become leaders recognized by others. Joshua Giddings was one; George Rye was another.

A close reading of Rye’s 1867 “Address to the Citizens of Shenandoah County, Virginia,” published two years following the Civil War, reveals his willingness to represent many county men who had favored abolition but had feared to speak out to the former slaveholders in the county. In the “Address...”, Rye says:

...it would be well for us, who are in the ship of progress, to ascertain our latitude and longitude, and to know the distance we have sailed, and the distance yet, to that long looked for haven where men enjoy equal rights before the law ( 1 ).

In Rye’s address, he refuses to give the government back to the slaveholders, either to lead or to control! (6). Essentially, says Rye, the business at hand was “to reconstruct the foundations of this government upon the eternal and enduring principles of justice and right, of equality before the law, to all men irrespective of country, color, or creed” (6). Then, after rubbing salt into the open wound of Confederate defeat, Rye offers a way forward for those who had taken “the wrong road.” He writes:

Then why not go back and bear to the right as the law directs, and place yourselves upon the republican platform that embodies all the principles of glorious memory, that stands out upon the shores of peace and happiness as a beacon light, inviting all nations, tongues, and people, to a full participation in its benefits and blessings.... We are all aboard of the same ship, if she sinks we all go down together. Freightened with equal rights for all men, she is now rigged and set for the port of peace, where the lion and the lamb lie down together, and it behooves all to see to it that the crazy passengers aboard do not interfere with the sailors or the helmsman (8).

Rye’s conclusion returns to his opening of the eight page speech to Shenandoah County citizens, and he provides an opportunity for past mistakes to be rectified through

Republican support for a revised Constitution for the Commonwealth of Virginia. Undoubtedly his audience included citizens who hated the presence of the Provost Marshall in Shenandoah County and the martial law established by the Military Reconstruction Act passed by Congress in 1867. Action was fast. Within five years, all southern states had again become part of the Union. Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment that granted citizenship to African Americans and all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and the Fifteenth Amendment that granted the right to vote to all American citizens.

In this critical and turbulent time in Virginia and the United States, Judge George Rye accepted the challenge to assist in establishing his beliefs within the state and federal Constitutions. Functioning as part of the Radical Reconstruction in Virginia, he served as secretary of the Virginia Constitutional Convention 1867-1868. Immediately following, George Rye became State Treasurer for three years, from 22 April 1868 to 31 December 1871 (Wayland 350).

As State Treasurer, Rye was not afraid of conflict, as is shown in the *Pennsylvania Railroad Chronology*, 25 October 1868:

R.T. Wilson, an agent of the B&O, arrives in Richmond to lobby against Gen. William Mahone's plan to consolidate the Norfolk & Petersburg, South Side and Virginia & Tennessee Railroads; Wilson agrees with carpetbagger Gov. Henry H. Wells to buy the state's Virginia & Tennessee stock, but State Treasurer George Rye refuses and makes the deal public (18-19).

Here, even among the railroad wheelers and dealers, Rye held his own opinion and power.

In the stressful five years immediately following the Civil War, George Rye's name appears also in a report of outrages against African Americans in Shenandoah County from John A. McDonnell to Bt. Brig. Gen. Orlando Brown, Asst. Commissioner, Freedmen's Bureau, Richmond & Winchester, 1 July 1868. McDonnell writes:

A second outrage was perpetrated on the colored girl Celina Jackson during my recent visit on inspection to Woodstock. While the girl was walking quietly into Church on the Sabbath, she was assaulted and struck across the face with an umbrella by Robert [unclear: Law], one of the party who on a former occasion was fined "one cent" by a Jury for whipping Mr. George Rye, present State Treasurer (4).

Despite such physical and mental abuse, George Rye emerged as a energetic organizer and leader in Virginia politics, one who strove for equal rights for African Americans immediately following the Civil War and during the establishment of the Underwood Constitution in 1870.

On his return from Richmond in 1872, Judge George Rye owned two Edinburg houses and another in Woodstock, where he "wintered," says Mary Ann Williamson, in The History of Edinburg (458-9). He also worked as a surveyor, according to John Coleman, retired Lee District Ranger for the United States Forest Service. Joe Miller had informed him that in 1876 Judge Rye donated and had erected the beautiful arched entrance gate with angel at Cedarwood Cemetery, Edinburg (Interview). Although two sources state that George Rye was a Quaker, both he and his wife Catherine are buried in St. Paul's Reformed Church Cemetery, Woodstock, VA; they had no children (Vann 174; Interview Joe Lehnen). Having spent almost sixty years believing in the equality of all men and women, working actively to eliminate racial discrimination, helping to establish the rights of African Americans to own land, vote and be educated, Judge George Rye died on 24 April 1890. Undoubtedly being an active abolitionist in Shenandoah County, which prides itself on freedom of speech and the rights of the individual, required courage and a strong belief that truth, rather than profit, should lead the Union. Imagine what the Union would have become without the actions of the Radical Republicans and abolitionists. Their discussions on race, gender and equality provided moral judgments for injustices in American society.. concludes James Brewer Stewart in Holy Warriors (206).

Surviving the hostilities of the antebellum period, the Civil War, and Reconstruction

period in Shenandoah County, George Rye spoke his mind and his convictions when others would not. I honor his belief in humanity, his leadership in national, state and local politics and his vision for the future of the United States of America.

Today Judge George Rye is hardly known as a past leader in Shenandoah County, its court, or in Republican politics. He is, in fact, forgotten. When Shenandoah County roads were named, however, someone recalled the old Judge Rye Road name given years before and so continued the name for route 691. Located west of the Liberty Furnace Road on the Great North Mountain, the road is a narrow, gravel, one lane scenic entry into the beautiful forest of the Lee Ranger District. From Wolf Gap Road, Sam Clark Road runs south into Judge Rye Road, which turns west toward and through the West Virginia line, in elevations of 1800 - 2400 feet. This high road of Shenandoah County may be one of its most remote to find, one of its most truthful to experience, and one that continues to offer equality and respect to each person. John Coleman, former Lee District Ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, in a recent interview praised the beauty of "Judge Rye Road," and he stated that Judge Rye, also a surveyor, is credited as having laid out not only the road into Hardy County across the Great North Mountain's highest points, but also the winding, mountainous road from Woodstock into Fort Valley. One must wonder why Judge Rye became interested in old, steep and difficult passages across the mountains, and whether these isolated mountain roads from east to west across Shenandoah County aided slaves who were trying to reach freedom in Ohio.

The "Judge Rye Road" exists: an appropriate metaphor, and monument, and memory for the life of Judge George Rye, Shenandoah County, Virginia.

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