

Alexandria Times

Denise Dunbar
 Publisher & Executive Editor
 ddunbar@alextimes.com

Margaret Stevens
 Sales Director
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Caitlyn Meisner
 Managing Editor/Reporter
 cmeisner@alextimes.com

Wafir Salih
 Reporter
 wsalih@alextimes.com

Arwen Clemans
 Photo Intern

Sandra Smith
 Intern

ADVERTISING

Margaret Stevens
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Marty DeVine
 mdevine@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan
 pculligan@alextimes.com

Tina Franco
 Office Administrator
 tfranco@alextimes.com

DIRECTOR OF ART & DESIGN

Jessica Kim
 graphics@alextimes.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Kerry Boyd Anderson
Kim Davis
Mark Eaton
Mark Edelman
Thompson Eskew
Kim Gilliam
Ryan Hopper
Kim Jackson
Lexie Jordan
Louise Krafft
Brianne McConnell
Jim McGrath
Kaitlin Murphy
Erin Shackelford
Dr. Vivek Sinha
Dr. David Weintritt
Amy Will

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Denise Dunbar
 Managing Partner

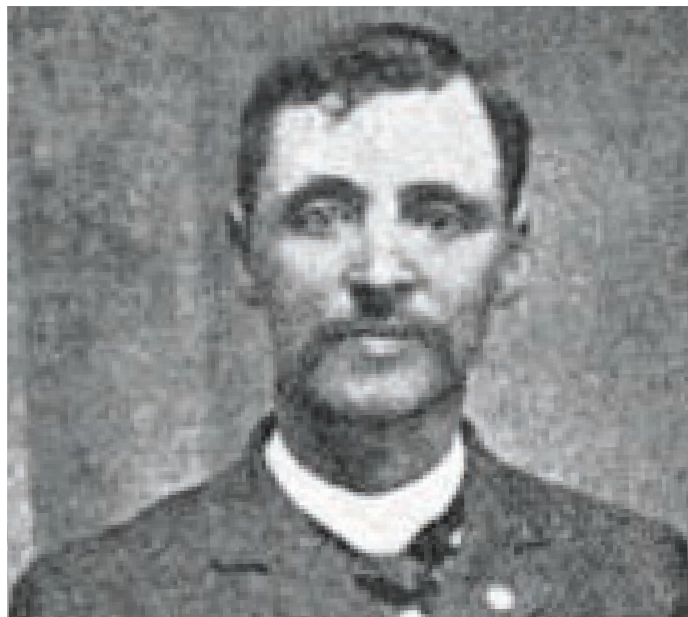
The Ariail family
Suzanne Brock
William Dunbar

Alexandria's own: Magnus Robinson

Born in Alexandria in 1852, Magnus L. Robinson grew to prominence as one of the leaders of the African American community in our city in the latter half of the 19th century. Described as “a bright mulatto, rather diminutive in size,” Robinson went on to become the first African American reporter for the Baltimore Daily Bee. He also founded and taught at McKinley Normal and Industrial School here in Alexandria.

Throughout his life, Robinson and his family fought for the rights and advancement of the first generation of freed African Americans both nationally and locally.

Robinson was the direct descendant of Caroline Branham, the nursemaid of Mount Vernon who summoned Elisha Dick to Mount Vernon as George Washington passed away. Robinson's father, Robert, was educated as a baker and later freed, and his aunts, Sarah and Eugena, became nursemaids after George Washington Parke Custis sold them to John Lloyd. Robinson was educated in private schools and initially apprenticed and became a baker, like his father. At the age of 16, he entered Howard University, but had to leave before graduating due to illness. Instead, he began his teaching career in 1879, and the school continued into the next century.



COURTESY PHOTO

Magnus Robinson fought for the rights of freed African Americans.

While teaching, Robinson's interest turned to journalism and politics, both locally and nationally. He initially contributed to papers including The Baltimore Sun, Baltimore American and The Lynchburg Daily News. He was hired by The Baltimore Daily Bee before opening The Virginia Post with his brother, also named Robert, in Harrisonburg.

Robinson also climbed the local Republican Party ranks during this time. In 1880, he became the first African American secretary of the Republican Committee of Rockingham County. That same year, he was also elected secretary of the Charlottesville Congressional

Convention. In 1881, he was nominated to run for magistrate of Alexandria.

In 1888, Robinson started a new publication in Washington, D.C., called The National Leader. The first issue endorsed Maine Republican James G. Blaine for president, and the paper continued to advocate Republican Party issues and candidates to its African American readership. In 1890, Robinson moved the paper from the District to Alexandria, renaming it The Weekly Leader.

At the same time, Magnus Robinson also held prominent positions within the local Odd Fellows Masonic lodge. He

served as Chief Marshal of the Odd Fellow's parade in 1889 and as President of the 8th Virginia District convention of colored men. He was the First Potentate of the Shriners and the Most Worshipful Master of Universal Lodge No. 1 between 1897 and 1899. Like his father and brother, Robinson became a prominent leader in his church, although he differed in denomination from his father Robert, who was ordained as a minister at Roberts Memorial United Methodist Church on South Washington Street.

Robinson's prominent role in the community was shown in his leadership role in the Freedom Day celebrations in Alexandria in 1889, 1890 and 1897. His local contemporaries included John A. and George Seaton, who were also his neighbors when he lived at 606 Gibbon St.

Robinson died of liver cancer on Aug. 17, 1918 in the District. He is buried in Bethel Cemetery on South Payne Street, next to his parents and brother.

Readers are invited to the headstone ceremony for Magnus Robinson on Sunday at 3 p.m. at Bethel Cemetery at 1430 Wilkes St. The ceremony is free and open to the public.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.