



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Alexandria's own: Magnus Robinson

Alexandria Times, February 8, 2018

Image: Magnus Robinson, Office of Historic Alexandria.

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 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.

Magnus 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 trained 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 age 16, he entered Howard University, but had to leave before graduating due to illness. Instead, he began his teaching career in 1879.

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 starting *The Virginia Post* with his brother 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, Virginia. That same year, he was 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 D.C. to Alexandria, renaming it *The Weekly Leader*.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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 Number One between 1897 and 1899. Like his father and brother, Magnus 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.

Magnus' 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 D.C. He is buried in Bethel Cemetery on South Payne Street, next to his parents and brother.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.