

Abstract

We the “White” People: Race, Culture, and the Virginia Constitution of 1902

Jeremy Boggs

In 1902, in an effort to reestablish what they saw as whites’ natural right to control government rule over blacks, the delegates to Virginia’s Constitutional Convention of 1901-1902 declared the new constitution law that they felt reflected “the true opinion of the people of Virginia.” This thesis argues that while Virginia’s 1902 Constitution increased the political power of whites and decreased that of black Virginians, the reasons why they needed the document in the first place highlights an important aspect regarding the anxiety of many white Virginians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Specifically, it helps to show how whiteness as a source of political and social power was not concrete or absolute, but rather was a reaction to the increasing presence and assertion of power by black Virginians. I argue that white Virginians, faced with the increasing political and social presence of black Virginians as equals, sought to reestablish their racial superiority through law and constitutional revision. However, by making their whiteness “visible”-- by continually reasserting their claim to legitimate power because they were “white”-- white Virginians revealed how unstable their racial world had become.