

The Clerk's Black History Series



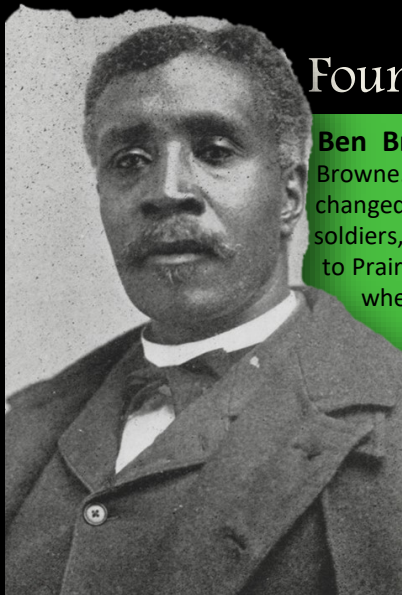
Debra DeBerry
Clerk of Superior Court
DeKalb County



William Washington Browne

(October 20, 1849 – December 21, 1897)

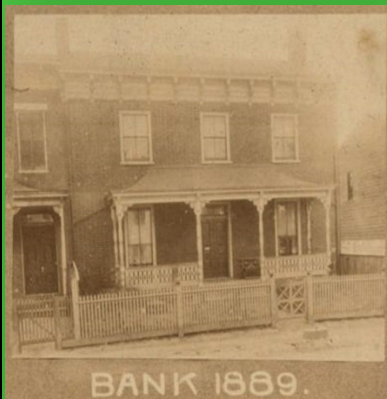
Founder of the First African-American Owned Bank



Ben Browne was born into slavery on October 20, 1849 in Habersham County, Georgia, to Joseph and Mariah Browne. At the age of eight, he was sold to a horse trader who took him to a plantation near Memphis, TN and changed his name to William Washington. William was 13-years old when he fled the plantation and joined Union soldiers, first serving on a Union Gunboat before joining the infantry. After his discharge in 1866, William moved to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, where he attended school. In 1869, he returned to the South to teach in Alabama, where he met Mary A. Graham. They married on August 16, 1873. William's experience as a soldier and teacher, along with his willingness to speak out against the Klan, made him a respected leader in the black community. After being denied admittance to the Independent Order of Good Templars, because the local body still recognized segregation, William was allowed his own charter and sponsorship under the name of the Grand United Order of True Reformers. In early 1876, William left his teaching position and headed for Richmond, Virginia to lead the local branch of True Reformers. When interest in the Virginia Reformers started to diminish, William returned to Alabama where he continued to develop plans to transform his temperance society into an insurance organization with a bank. Unfortunately he could not obtain the necessary state charter, so, in 1880, he returned to Richmond. During this time he served as pastor of the Leigh Street Methodist Episcopal Church.

In 1881, he founded the Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers, a black fraternal organization, and created the Mutual Benefit and Relief Plan of the United Order of True Reformers. The plan was an unsuccessful savings and death benefit that depended on the financial contributions of new members. In January 1884 and with some reform, the General Assembly passed a bill incorporating the Supreme Fountain Grand United Order of True Reformers and in 1885 the True Reformers instituted the first insurance plan of an African-American fraternal society that was based on actuarial calculations of life expectancies. The insurance business became profitable for the True Reformers and allowed them to purchase real estate around Richmond and the east coast.

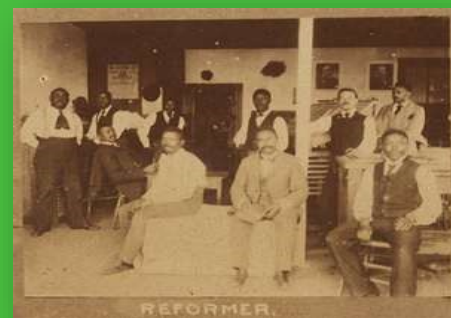
In 1887 when William visited Charlotte County, Virginia to establish a local branch of the True Reformers, he found that the branch kept its savings deposits with a white shopkeeper in the county. With racial tensions high after an 1887 lynching, the shopkeeper reported to other white residents that local blacks were organizing and raising funds, and the branch was forced to disband. William decided the True Reformers would need to establish and operate their own bank to keep the whites from monitoring their finances.



In 1888, the True Reformers received a charter from the state to establish the Savings Bank of the Grand Fountain, United Order of True Reformers. One year later in 1889, The Savings Bank of the Grand Fountain, United Order of True Reformers opened, operating from William's house at 105 West Jackson Street, in Jackson Ward, Richmond VA. The first day's deposits totaled \$1,269.28 (\$33,476.29 today). In 1891, the bank moved several blocks away to 604-608 North Second Street. The bank grew and survived the financial panic of 1893, and was the only bank in Richmond to maintain full operation, honor all checks and pay out the full value of accounts.

In 1895, William Washington Browne was one of eight men, including Booker T. Washing, selected to represent African-Americans at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta.

In 1897 physicians discovered a cancerous tumor and urged William to have the affected arm amputated. William refused and the cancer spread quickly. On December 21, 1897, William Washington Browne died in Washington, D.C. He was buried in Sycamore Cemetery, and his funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Richmond, Virginia's black community. Browne bequeathed his estate to his widow, except for small legacies to the boy and girl they had adopted. After his death the True Reformers initially continued to prosper, but the order collapsed in the wake of the scandalous failure of its bank in 1910.



105 West Jackson Street, Richmond, VA