

## Ellison, Stewart <sup>[1]</sup>

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**March 8, 1832 - October 24, 1899**

Stewart Ellison, building contractor and one of the first three Black men elected as Wake County <sup>[2]</sup> legislator and Raleigh <sup>[3]</sup> city commissioner, was born in Beaufort County <sup>[4]</sup>, enslaved by Abner P. Neal. At age thirteen he began a seven-year apprenticeship in carpentry under Marris Newton, a Black mechanic in Washington, N.C. <sup>[5]</sup> Later he obtained some education through night school and independent reading.

From 1852 to 1854, Ellison was employed in Raleigh in the construction of several Fayetteville Street buildings following a widely destructive December 1851 fire; he also worked on the first buildings at Dorothea Dix Hospital for the Insane <sup>[6]</sup>. Except for the period 1855–62, when he was again in Washington, Raleigh was his home for the rest of his life. After the Civil War <sup>[7]</sup> he was a grocer and commission merchant. Reverting again in 1867 to the building trade, he became, according to a contemporary, Charles N. Hunter <sup>[8]</sup>, "probably the most extensive colored contractor in the state," with a reputation for superior workmanship in the "many elegant residences in and around Raleigh and in other sections of the State." He also built schoolhouses, hospitals, and offices for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands <sup>[9]</sup>.

In the North Carolina Freedmen's Convention in Raleigh, September 29 to October 3, 1865, Ellison played a leading role as a vice-president. He was assistant grand marshal and a featured speaker for Raleigh's Emancipation Day <sup>[10]</sup> observance on January 1, 1870. A year earlier, on January 4, 1869, he had been one of the first three Black men elected to Raleigh's Board of Commissioners (Governor Holden <sup>[11]</sup> having appointed the two Black men who served briefly in 1868). His first committee assignment was as one of three commissioners to make plans for a new city hall and market house to replace the 1840 structure destroyed by fire a few weeks earlier. For the entire decade, January 1869–May 1879, he was reelected annually to Raleigh's governing board, during which time city charter revisions changed elections from January to May in 1871 and substituted seventeen aldermen in five wards for nine commissioners in three beginning in 1875. Ellison's constituents thereafter formed the southeastern Second Ward. In his eleventh campaign, that of 1879, he was defeated for the city post, but Black men continued to be elected to the board through the remainder of the century.

During this decade he served as Wake County Republican representative in six General Assembly <sup>[12]</sup> sessions, those of 1870, 1871, 1872, 1873, 1879, and 1880. He declined his party's nomination in 1876. During his last term (1879–80) he was a member of the committees on Education; Deaf, Dumb, and Blind; and Public Buildings. J. S. Tomlinson, who compiled short biographies of members of that legislature, termed him "far above the average of his race as to intelligence," and stated that he took "practical views of most subjects of general importance." Ellison's defeat in the 1880 election by fewer than twenty votes caused "universal dissatisfaction among the colored voters," according to Black legislator and editor James H. Harris <sup>[13]</sup>, who charged that white Republican betrayal was "ominous of future evil to the unity of the Republican party" in Wake.

Also during the 1870s Ellison served three terms as a director of the state penitentiary. At the end of the first year, March 1874–March 1875, he was nominated for another term by Governor Curtis Brogden <sup>[14]</sup> on 10 March, but the senate refused to confirm him. Two months later the governor appointed him to fill a vacancy, and he served from 26 May 1875 to 15 Feb. 1877.

Following the close of his legislative and municipal board careers, Ellison was business manager of the North Carolina Republican <sup>[15]</sup> edited by James H. Harris. He was active in the 1880 antiexodus movement to encourage Black people not to migrate out of the state and was a founder of the North Carolina Industrial Association <sup>[16]</sup>, which sponsored separate Negro fairs <sup>[17]</sup> beginning in 1879. He was Grand Master of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Masons <sup>[18]</sup> during 1886–90.

Ellison continued to be listed as a carpenter in Raleigh city directories <sup>[19]</sup> from 1875–76 through 1899–1900, residing until 1886 at 517 South Person Street. In the late 1880s he served as county jailer and in the 1890s was janitor in the United States Courthouse and Post Office in Raleigh, living then in Raleigh's Southside at 24 Hayti Alley. He died of heart failure, apparently in poverty, probably in Raleigh. His widow's name recurs in city directories as a domestic or laundress from 1901 until 1913–14 at their Hayti Alley address. He was buried at Mount Hope Cemetery, Raleigh.

Ellison's first wife was Mary Davis of Beaufort County, by whom he had three daughters. On June 7, 1866 he was married, second, to Narcissa Lucas in Raleigh by the Reverend G. W. Brodie, pastor of St. Paul's A. M. E. Church, of which he was an early member. His eldest daughter, Sophia E., married, also at St. Paul's, John W. Lee, Jr., on 12 Nov. 1880. A second daughter was Mary J. Ellison; and a third, Bettie, was the first wife of Spanish-American War <sup>[20]</sup> Colonel James H. Young <sup>[21]</sup>. A great-grandson (through the third daughter Bettie), James Young Carter (b. 20 Apr. 1915), was an instructor in law

at [North Carolina College](#) <sup>[22]</sup>, Durham, before moving to Illinois where he was a member of the Illinois state legislature (1955–73) and commissioner of the Public Vehicle License Commission, City of Chicago (1960). Carter's only daughter, Christine Maudette Carter, was one of the first Black officers employed in the bond department of the First National Bank of the City of Chicago.

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## Additional Resources

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Supreme court of North Carolina. 1884. : Stewart Ellison v. the city of Raleigh and mayor and aldermen *The American Law Register*. Philadelphia: D.B. Canfield & Co. Vol. 32, No. 2.:137-143. <https://archive.org/details/jstor-3305052> <sup>[26]</sup> (accessed November 5, 2014).

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## Authors:

[Reid, Elizabeth Davis](#) <sup>[31]</sup>

## Origin - location:

[Beaufort County](#) <sup>[32]</sup>

[Raleigh](#) <sup>[33]</sup>

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[Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press](#) <sup>[34]</sup>

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