

African Americans in the United States Congress During Reconstruction

Overview

Through their participation in class discussion and the review of primary sources, students will explore the political climate and changes that took place during Reconstruction. Students will focus on the legislation that restricted and advanced the rights of African Americans throughout this period, examining how African American men were able to gain representation in Congress. Through creation of and participation in a group teaching activity, students will focus on the important roles these African American legislators filled.

Grade

8

North Carolina Essential Standards

- 8.H.2.1 - Explain the impact of economic, political, social, and military conflicts (e.g. war, slavery, states' rights and citizenship and immigration policies) on the development of North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.H.2.2 - Summarize how leadership and citizen actions (e.g. the founding fathers, the Regulators, the Greensboro Four, and participants of the Wilmington Race Riots, 1898) influenced the outcome of key conflicts in North Carolina and the United States
- 8.H.2.3 - Summarize the role of debate, compromise, and negotiation during significant periods in the history of North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.H.3.3 - Explain how individuals and groups have influenced economic, political and social change in North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.C&G.1.4 - Analyze access to democratic rights and freedoms among various groups in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. enslaved people, women, wage earners, landless farmers, American Indians, African Americans and other ethnic groups).

Essential Questions

- In what ways were the rights of freed blacks still restricted after slavery?
- What components of Reconstruction enabled African Americans to participate in government?
- What contributions did African Americans serving in US Congress make throughout Reconstruction?
- How have the political rights of African Americans changed throughout history?
- What responsibilities does a person have to ensure equal rights among all people?

Materials

- *African Americans in the US Congress During Reconstruction Power Point*, available in PDF format in the Database of Civic Resources
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click "View" in the top menu bar of the file, and select "Full Screen Mode"
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to cnorris@unc.edu

- “Laws Fail to Protect Us,” primary source attached
- African Americans in the United States Congress During Reconstruction, assignment sheet and example bios attached
- Internet access (optional)
- “Hiram replacing Jefferson Davis,” political cartoon attached

Duration

90+ minutes (split over two days)

Preparation

Students should have a basic understanding of the period of Reconstruction. See the Consortium’s “Reconstruction after the Civil War,” available in the Database of Civic Resources.

Procedure

Day 1

Warm-Up: Changes in Government During Reconstruction

1. As a warm-up, project slide 2 of the accompanying PPT, which contains two images of government officials and discuss:
 - What do you see in these pictures? How do they compare and contrast to each other?
 - What time period(s) do you think these pictures represent and why?
 - Based on your observations and learned information, how has government changed throughout history?

Class Discussion: Legislation During Reconstruction

2. Explain to students that while Reconstruction was a period of vast struggle for those newly freed, various pieces of legislation during the period actually resulted in several African Americans serving in the reconstructed US Congress, as well as in various state assemblies. Tell students that today’s lesson will focus on learning about the political advances and regressions during the period of Reconstruction.
3. Project slide 3 and ask students to review what they already know regarding Reconstruction, focusing on what life was like for freed slaves during the Reconstruction years.
 - What were the difficulties freedmen faced, even though they were emancipated?
 - Did the white community in the South embrace the new free status of those they had recently enslaved? Explain.
4. Project slides 4 & 5 and discuss the creation and enforcement of **Black Codes** in the former slave states during Reconstruction.
5. Next, explain to students that in an effort to right such wrongs as the Black Codes, the **Civil Rights Act of 1866** was passed. Project slide 6 which contains an excerpt from the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and ask a student volunteer to read the excerpt out loud. Discuss:
 - What is the purpose of this Act?
 - Why do you think the US Congress passed this Act?

- How do you think President Andrew Johnson responded to this Act when it came across his desk?
6. Ensure students understand that this Act officially granted citizenship to all male persons in the United States "without distinction of race or color, or previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude." Thus, officially the Act should have granted the same rights enjoyed by white citizens to freedmen. President Andrew Johnson attempted to veto the bill, but his veto was overturned by a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress, and the bill became law. Discuss:
 - Do you think this Act was effective in improving the situation, status, rights, etc. of freedmen? Explain. (While such legislation was a step in the right direction, Southern states still greatly restricted the rights of freed slaves.)
 - If federal law stated that all males, regardless of their "race or color, or previous condition of slavery" were to be treated as equal citizens, why were freedmen still experiencing such difficulty in Southern states? (Discuss the various levels of law with students – federal, state, and local – and while no law passed at the local level should contradict state law, and no law passed at the state level should contradict federal law, this was often ignored during Reconstruction. Without any oversight, many Southern states disregarded federal law and attempted to maintain the unjust societies they were accustomed to.)
 7. Explain to students that even with the passing of such legislation, riots occurred in the South (i.e., Memphis and New Orleans in 1866) which were basically massacres conducted against black communities. It became clear that if some kind of police action or official order, enacted in the form of an occupation, wasn't established at least for a short period of time, white Southerners were going to continue to oppress freed slaves and likely grow more lawless. To Northerners, this would mean that the cause for which so many of them had died for during the Civil War would have been in vain.
 8. To illustrate this point, hand out the attached "Laws Fail to Protect Us," and instruct students to partner up, read the document, and then discuss the questions noted. Once students have had approximately 15 minutes to work independently, have them report their thoughts back to class. Ensure students understand that this is a copy of an actual document sent by the African American citizens of Calhoun, GA in which they request protection from the federal troops of the Third Military District due to the increasing violence against them as the fall 1867 election approached.
 9. Explain to students that Johnson's attitude regarding the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and his lack of concern for the treatment of the freed slaves contributed to the growth of the **Radical Republican** movement, which favored increased intervention in the South and more aid for former slaves, and ultimately resulted in the attempt to impeach Johnson.
 10. Project [slide 7](#) (regarding the Fourteenth Amendment) and [slide 8](#) (regarding the Fifteenth Amendment) and discuss:
 - What impact do you think the Fourteenth Amendment had after it was passed?

- How do you think African American men gaining the right to vote effected the federal government?
- How do you think white Southerners reacted to the enfranchisement of former slave men?

The First African Americans in the US Senate and House of Representatives

11. Once black men were given the right to vote, hundreds of qualified black legislators were elected to state and national offices, even though the elections were riddled with threats and violence. Yet, despite all the adversity facing freed Blacks, these groundbreaking politicians passed ambitious civil rights and public education laws.
12. Point out that all of these Reconstruction-era black Senators and Representatives were members of the **Republican Party**. The Republicans represented the party of **Abraham Lincoln** and the **Emancipation Proclamation**, and until 1876, the party made efforts to ensure that southern blacks were able to vote. Meanwhile the **Southern Democrats** were associated as the party of slavery and secession. Discuss:
 - How do you imagine freed slaves and other African Americans felt upon the election of black men to Congress?
 - How do you imagine the Southern white community responded to this progression?
 - What risks do you think African Americans took by serving in Congress?
13. Explain to students that they will be examining these first African Americans to serve in the Senate and House of Representatives further. Divide students into groups of 5-7 (groups can be smaller or larger depending upon the teacher's preference and the size of the class), giving each group member a different bio of an African American member of the United States Congress during Reconstruction (examples are attached for some of the officials) and the attached assignment instructions.
14. Tell students that each member of their group has a different bio and their assignment will be to teach each other about the person assigned to them via a presentation in which they share a summary of the legislator's life and accomplishments, their opinion regarding the legislator, and a prop that relates to the legislator. Go over the instruction sheet and allow students to work on their bio until the end of class, instructing them to finish the assignment for homework and be ready to teach their group mates about their Senator or Representative the following day. Circulate as students work to ensure understanding.

➤ **Teacher Notes:**

- Should teachers wish to allot more time for this assignment, students can receive only the name of the African American government official (rather than the handout) and be responsible for all of the research.
- The bios attached are not exhaustive of the African Americans who served in Congress during Reconstruction; teachers should feel free to assign bios that are not already included.
- As students are in small groups, they will only learn about 5-7 of the African American legislators. Should teachers want students to learn about a larger number of the

Representatives, another option is to assign each class member a different name and have them present their project in front of the entire class, rather than in small groups.

15. To end class and review, project slide 9 and discuss:
- What do you see here?
 - What is the setting of this political cartoon?
 - Who do the figures represent?
 - What is the artist trying to convey? What evidence in the cartoon backs up your interpretation?
 - Why is Jefferson Davis pictured in this way?
 - Let students know that the image is a political cartoon that appeared in Harper's Weekly in New York on April 9, 1870. It depicts Jefferson Davis (as Iago from Othello) being replace by Hiram Revels. Revels was elected by a vote of 81 to 15 to fill the last year of an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate; the seat had once been held by Jefferson Davis, the former president of the Confederate States of America.)

Day 2

Peer to Peer Teaching on African Americans in US Congress During Reconstruction

16. As students enter class, have them break into their groups. Project slide 10 and instruct students to create the chart projected on a piece of notebook paper.
17. Explain that as their group mates present their bio summaries, opinions, and props, students should take notes on what they learn. Review group work expectations, and instruct students to begin sharing in their small groups. Allow for around 20 minutes. Circulate as students work to ensure they are on task and following your expected format.
18. Once all groups are finished, discuss as a class:
- Of the African Americans you learned about, who do you most admire and why?
 - What common characteristics would you infer these Congressmen shared?
 - In what ways did these African Americans impact American society? Why are they relevant to us today?
 - Many of your bios said that your person was not re-elected. Why do you think this was?
 - Unfortunately, the representation of African Americans in Congress during Reconstruction years did not last long. What do you predict happened after Reconstruction to keep African Americans from participating in government for many years, both as representatives and as voters?

The 1875 Civil Rights Act

19. Explain to students that the African American Congressmen they have learned about played an important role in congressional civil rights debates, insisting on the importance of civil rights in terms of the needs and desires of the black constituency. They would tell, in their speeches, how they themselves were stigmatized. Even coming to Washington as a member of the Congress, they would sometimes have to sit in separate cars from white patrons, would be unable to find a restaurant that would serve African Americans, or would be unable to find a hotel in town that

would rent rooms to them. Project [slide 11](#) and explain that with African American representatives offering first-hand accounts of these constant humiliations to the remainder of Congress, they were able to affect the passing of the Civil Rights of 1875, which was an attempt to address such unjust treatment. The Act protected all Americans, regardless of race, in their access to public accommodations and facilities such as restaurants, theaters, trains and other public transportation, and protected the right to serve on juries.

20. Unfortunately, in 1874, the Democrats regained control of Congress and without a Republican majority, civil rights legislation halted. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was not enforced, and the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 1883. The fight for civil rights then moved to the judicial realm.
21. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that designating separate railway cars for whites and blacks was constitutional, as long as the facilities were "equal." The "separate but equal" doctrine stood until 1954, when the Supreme Court ordered school desegregation in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. The next federal bill designed to protect civil rights would not become law until 1957, three-quarters of a century after the 1875 Civil Rights Act.
22. Explain to students that due to the **Compromise of 1877**, the political rights of African Americans were largely forgotten. During the disputed Presidential election of 1876 between **Democrat Samuel J. Tilden** and **Republican Rutherford B. Hayes**, Democrats finally conceded to Hayes and agreed to observe the political rights of blacks. Likewise, Republicans said they would no longer intervene in southern affairs and agreed to offer federal money for southern projects. However, as Democrats began to regain control of the Southern legislatures, and without Republican intervention, they again restricted the rights of African Americans, such as by not allowing them to vote. By 1890, southern states began to disenfranchise black voters with **literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and white primaries**. Southern states and local governments gradually adopted laws that segregated blacks. Racial violence in the form of lynching and race riots increased in frequency. The last black Congressman elected from the South was **George Henry White of North Carolina**, elected in 1897. His term expired in 1901, the same year the last President to have fought in the civil war – **William McKinley** – died. No blacks served in the Congress for the next 28 years.

It was not until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, often called the **Second Reconstruction**, that African American people truly begin to win their civil rights.

23. End class by discussing:
 - Why do you think opposition to African American rights existed?
 - What components of Reconstruction allowed African Americans to participate in government?
 - In what way did these measures affect African Americans politically? (Facilitate discussion of the fact that African Americans acquired the right to vote across the Southern states for a period during Reconstruction. Point out that in several states - i.e. Mississippi and South Carolina - African Americans were the majority of the population, and their votes largely

determined election outcomes. For example, over 500,000 African Americans voted for the first time in the 1868 presidential election, helping to elect **Republican Ulysses S. Grant.**)

- In what ways has our society progressed from this time? In what ways do we still need to improve?
- From 1870-2010, 123 African American members served in the United States Congress. In the election of 2008, the first African American was elected president of the United States of America. In what way is this a testament to the historical resilience and strength in the face of adversity exhibited by African Americans?
- What does it take on the part of individuals to improve unjust situations such as the denial of a people's civil rights?

Additional Activities

- Read/listen to and discuss President Barack Obama's 2008 speech regarding race:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/03/18/obama-race-speech-read-th_n_92077.html

Laws Fail to Protect Us

Calhoun, Georgia

August 25, 1867

General:

We the Colored people of the town of Calhoun and County of Gordon desire to call your attention to the State of Affairs that now exist in our midst.

On the 16th day of the month, the Union Republican Party held a Meeting which the Colored people of the County attended en masse. Since that time we seem to have the particular hatred and spite of that class who were opposed to the principles set forth in that meeting.

Their first act was to deprive us the privilege to worship any longer in the Church. Since we have procured one of our own, they threaten us if we hold meetings in it.

There has been houses broken open, windows smashed and doors broken down in the dead hours of the night, men rushing in, cursing and swearing and discharging their Pistols inside the house. Men have been knocked down and unmercifully beaten and yet the authorities do not notice it at all. We would open a school here, but are almost afraid to do so, not knowing that we have any protection for life or limb.

We wish to do right, obey the Laws and live in peace and quietude but when we are assailed at the midnight hour, our lives threatened and the Laws fail to protect or assist us we can but defend ourselves, let the consequences be what they may. Yet we wish to avoid all such collisions.

We would respectfully ask that a few soldiers be sent here, believing it is the only way we can live in peace until after the Elections this fall.

[Twenty-four signatures]

Source: Excerpt from Dorothy Sterling, ed., Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Word of African Americans. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994.

Discuss:

1. Who wrote this letter and to whom was it written?
2. What types of injustices do the authors note they have experienced?
3. What are the authors requesting?
4. Why do you think they request the presence of soldiers until after the fall Elections in particular?
5. Based on this letter, how would you characterize its authors and why?
6. What can we learn regarding the period of Reconstruction based upon this letter?

Name: _____

African Americans in the United States Congress During Reconstruction

Assignment Sheet

1. Carefully read the information provided on the bio.
2. Clarify any confusing information or questions by asking your groupmates for help. If they cannot assist you, ask the teacher.
3. On notebook paper, summarize the information into your own words, with the goal of teaching your group members about this African American politician. If time permits, conduct further research.
4. In addition to your summary, be prepared to share your opinion with your group based on the following questions:
 - a. What is most interesting about your person's life?
 - b. What challenges do you imagine he would have faced?
 - c. What characteristics do you infer this person had? What do you most admire about him?
 - d. How did this person affect the society in which he lived, and what impact might that have had on our government and society today?
5. Find or create 1-2 props that represent your person, which you will show and/or pass around to group mates as you teach them about your assigned person. These props might be everyday household items or something you have drawn or constructed. The props can be literal or abstract. (For example, if your person ended up being a judge, you might bring in a gavel to pass around to your group as you teach about him.)
6. You will be responsible for teaching your group mates about your person by summarizing his life and accomplishments, sharing your opinion on this person, as well as showing your prop as a visual aid to help group members remember your person. As groups share, all members will fill out a chart of learned information. Be prepared to answer questions group members may have about your person as well.

Notes:

African Americans in the United States Congress during Reconstruction

Hiram Rhodes Revels



Hiram Rhodes Revels was the first African American to serve in the U.S. Senate, representing Mississippi in 1870 and 1871 during Reconstruction. As of 2006, Revels was one of only five African Americans to have served in the United States Senate.

Born free in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Revels was the son of a freeman and an enslaved mother. He attended college and seminary school and became an ordained minister. During the Civil War, Revels helped raise two black Union regiments in Maryland and Missouri and participated in the battle of Vicksburg in Mississippi. After the war ended, he returned to his ministry and founded schools for black children.

During Reconstruction in 1868, Revels was elected alderman in Natchez. In 1869, he was elected to represent Adams County in the Mississippi State Senate. His election was met with opposition from Southern conservative Democrats, who said that based on the Dred Scott Decision, no black man was a citizen before the 14th Amendment was ratified in 1868. Because election to the Senate required nine years' prior citizenship, opponents of Revels claimed he could not be seated, having been a citizen by law for only two years. Supporters of Revels countered by stating that the Dred Scott decision applied only to those blacks who were of pure African blood. Revels was of mixed black, white and Native American ancestry, and therefore exempt. On February 25, 1870, Revels, by a vote of 48 to 8, became the first black man to be seated in the United States Senate and served a one-year term.

While in the Senate, Revels quietly worked for equality. He tried to reassure Senators about the capability of blacks and fought for desegregation in Washington, D.C. He nominated a young black man to the United States Military Academy, although he was subsequently denied admission. Revels was successful, however, in championing the cause of black workers who had been barred by their color from working at the Washington Navy Yard.

He served on both the Committee on Education and Labor and the Committee on the District of Columbia. During this time, much of the Senate's attention focused on Reconstruction issues. While Radical Republicans called for continued punishment of ex-Confederates, Revels argued for amnesty and a restoration of full citizenship, provided they swore an oath of loyalty to the United States.

Revels resigned two months before his term expired and was appointed the first president of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College (now Alcorn State University) located in Claiborne County, Mississippi, where he also taught philosophy.

African Americans in the United States Congress during Reconstruction

Benjamin Sterling Turner, Alabama



Benjamin Sterling Turner was born in Weldon, North Carolina on March 17, 1825, and served as United States Representative from Alabama. Raised as a slave, Turner received no early education. He moved to Alabama in 1830, and there secretly studied and gained an education.

Turner was a mercantilist and a tax collector of Dallas County, Alabama in 1867. He was a councilman of Selma, AL in 1869. He was elected as a Republican to the Forty-second Congress (March 4, 1871 - March 3, 1873), but was unsuccessful in his run for reelection in 1872 to the Forty-third Congress. In 1880, Turner was a delegate to the Republican National Convention.

After his political career, Turner engaged in agricultural pursuits in Alabama.

Jefferson Franklin Long, Georgia



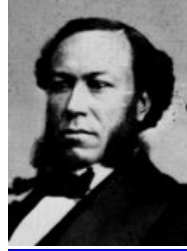
Jefferson Franklin Long was the first African American from Georgia to be elected to the United States House of Representatives.

Born a slave near the city of Knoxville and Crawford County, Georgia in 1836, he was self-educated and later became a merchant tailor in Macon, Georgia.

Long was elected as a Republican to the Forty-first Congress and served from December 22, 1870, to March 3, 1871. Long was not a candidate for re-nomination in 1870, but did serve as a delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1880. He resumed business in Macon, Georgia, and died there on February 4, 1901.

African Americans in the United States Congress during Reconstruction

Joseph Hayne Rainey, South Carolina



Joseph Rainey was the first African American to serve in the United States House of Representatives and the second black person to serve in the United States Senate (U.S. Senator Hiram Revels was the first).

Rainey was born in Georgetown, South Carolina. His parents were both slaves, but his father had a successful business as a barber, enabling him to purchase his family's freedom shortly after Joseph Rainey's birth. In 1861, with the outbreak of the American Civil War, Rainey was drafted by the Confederate government to work on fortifications in Charleston, South Carolina, as well as to work as a laborer on blockade runner ships. In 1862, he and his wife were able to escape to Bermuda.

In 1866, following the war's end, Rainey returned to South Carolina. He quickly involved himself in politics, joining the executive committee of the state Republican Party. In 1868, he was a delegate to the convention which wrote South Carolina's new state constitution. In 1870, Rainey was elected to the State Senate of South Carolina. Later that year, he was elected to fill a vacancy in the Forty-first Congress of the United States as a Republican. Rainey was re-elected to Congress four times, serving until March 3, 1879, which made him the longest-serving black Congressmen prior to William L. Dawson in the 1950s.

During his term in Congress from 1870-1879, Rainey focused on supporting legislation to protect the civil rights of Southern blacks. This pursuit eventually proved unsuccessful when the black electorate lost all political power at the end of Reconstruction. As the opponents of Reconstruction solidified their control over South Carolina politics, Rainey was defeated for re-election at the end of Reconstruction.

After leaving Congress, Joseph Rainey was appointed internal-revenue agent of South Carolina. He held this position for two years, after which he began a career in private commerce.

African Americans in the United States Congress during Reconstruction

Josiah Thomas Walls, Florida



Josiah Walls was a United States Congressman from 1871 until 1873 and 1873 until 1875.

Born a slave near Winchester, Virginia, he was forced to join the Confederate Army and was later captured by the Union Army in 1862 at Yorktown. He voluntarily joined the United States Colored Troops in 1863 and rose to the rank of corporal. He was discharged in Florida and settled in Alachua County, FL.

Walls was elected as the sole representative from Florida to the Forty-second United States Congress in 1871, but the vote was contested by Silas L. Niblack. The Committee on Elections eventually unseated Walls. Walls ran and was elected again in 1873 and again won a narrow victory that his opponent Jesse Finley contested. He lost the recount in 1874. He returned to Florida and farmed until his death on May 15, 1905.

While in office, Walls introduced bills to establish a national education fund and aid pensioners and Seminole War Veterans.

Robert Brown Elliott, South Carolina



Robert Brown Elliott was an African American member of the United States House of Representatives from South Carolina.

Born in Liverpool, England, he graduated from Eton College in 1859, and served in the Royal Navy. He moved to South Carolina in 1867 and established a law practice. Elliott helped organize the local Republican Party and served at the state constitutional convention. In 1868 he was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives. The next year he was appointed assistant adjutant-general; he was the first African American commanding general of the South Carolina National Guard. As part of his job, he helped form a state militia to fight the Ku Klux Klan.

Elliott was elected as a Republican to the Forty-second and Forty-third United States Congress. He “delivered a celebrated speech” in favor of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. He resigned on November 1, 1874, to fight political corruption in South Carolina. He served once more as a member of the state house of representatives, where he was elected as Speaker of the House.

In 1876, he was elected South Carolina Attorney General. However, Reconstruction ended that year and he was forced out of office. He set up a private law practice in New Orleans.

African Americans in the United States Congress during Reconstruction

John Adams Hyman, North Carolina

John Adams Hyman was a U.S. Congressman from North Carolina from 1875 to 1877.

Born a slave near Warrenton, North Carolina, Hyman was sold to a new master in Alabama in 1861 after it was discovered that he was attempting to educate himself. In twenty-five years as a slave, Hyman was sold at least eight times.

After the Civil War and the emancipation of southern slaves, Hyman returned to North Carolina in 1865 and engaged in agricultural pursuits.

Hyman was a delegate to the State equal rights convention in 1865 and to the State constitutional convention in 1868. Hyman was elected to the North Carolina Senate, where he served from 1868 to 1874. In 1874, he was elected as a Republican to the 44th United States House of Representatives and served for one term (March 4, 1875–March 3, 1877).

After unsuccessfully running for re-nomination to Congress in 1876, Hyman returned to agricultural pursuits and was also a special deputy collector of internal revenue for the fourth district of North Carolina from July 1, 1877 to June 30, 1878. Hyman died in Washington, DC on September 14, 1891.

James Edward O'Hara, North Carolina



James Edward O'Hara was an African American Republican member of the United States House of Representatives from 1883 to 1887, representing North Carolina.

O'Hara was born in New York City on February 26, 1844. He studied law in North Carolina and at Howard University. He was elected to serve in the North Carolina House of Representatives in 1868-1869. Later, he was elected chairman of the board of commissioners for Halifax County, North Carolina (1872-1876). He was admitted to the bar in 1873 and practiced law.

O'Hara was elected as a Republican to the Forty-eighth and Forty-ninth Congresses (March 4, 1883 - March 3, 1887). He was an unsuccessful candidate for reelection in 1886 to the Fiftieth Congress and resumed the practice of law in New Bern, North Carolina. He died on September 15, 1905, aged 61.

African Americans in the United States Congress During Reconstruction

Henry Plummer Cheatham, North Carolina



Henry Plummer Cheatham was an African American Republican member of the United States House of Representatives from 1889 to 1893.

Born in slavery in what is now Vance County, North Carolina, Cheatham attended public school and graduated from Shaw University in 1883. After working as a school principal, Cheatham served as the elected Register of Deeds for Vance County (1884-1888). In 1888, Cheatham was narrowly elected to Congress over incumbent Furnifold M. Simmons (who would later lead the White Supremacy campaigns that disfranchised North Carolina blacks). During the campaign, Cheatham allegedly told black voters that Simmons and President Grover Cleveland would re-enslave them.

In Congress, Cheatham (then the only black North Carolina congressman) supported federal support for education, the McKinley tariff, and a bill to safeguard the voting rights of African Americans. He tended mostly to the needs of his constituents (of both races), but was largely unsuccessful getting his own bills passed.

In 1890, Cheatham defeated his Democrat opponent, but nationwide, Democrats re-took the House of Representatives, and Cheatham found himself the only black congressman in the Fifty-second Congress (he had also been the only black congressman in the first half of the 51st Congress). He unsuccessfully sought re-election to a third term in 1892, after the North Carolina legislature changed the boundaries of his congressional district.

In 1897, President William McKinley's administration appointed him Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, a position he held through 1901. Cheatham, a friend and ally of Booker T. Washington, was criticized for standing by McKinley as the Republican administration did little to stem the rising tide of racism and segregation.

After four years in Washington, D.C., Cheatham returned to farm in Littleton, North Carolina. He later moved to Oxford, North Carolina and served as superintendent of the Colored Orphanage of North Carolina (then known as the Colored Orphan Asylum) there for the next twenty-eight years.

African Americans in the United States Congress during Reconstruction

George Henry White, North Carolina



George Henry White was a Republican U.S. Congressman from North Carolina between 1897 and 1901. He was the last African American Congressman of the Reconstruction era. By the time of his election, Reconstruction had long since been overturned throughout almost all the South, making it impossible for blacks to be elected to federal office. After White left office, no other black American would serve in Congress until Oscar De Priest was elected in 1928; no other black American would be elected to Congress from the South until after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Born in Rosindale, North Carolina, White attended public school and then Howard University in Washington, D.C. He studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1879, practicing in New Bern, North Carolina. He became the principal of the State Normal School of North Carolina. White entered politics in 1880, elected to a single year in the North Carolina House of Representatives, and then to the North Carolina Senate in 1885. In 1886, he was named solicitor and prosecuting attorney for the second judicial district of North Carolina, a post he held until 1894.

A delegate to the 1896 and 1900 Republican National Conventions, White was elected to the U.S. Congress in 1896 and re-elected in 1898. As North Carolina Democrats changed laws and intimidated blacks from voting, he chose not to seek a third term and returned to law and banking. He delivered his final speech on January 29, 1901. “This is perhaps the Negroes’ temporary farewell to the American Congress,” he said, “but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again. These parting words are in behalf of an outraged, heart-broken, bruised and bleeding, but God-fearing people; faithful, industrious, loyal, rising people – full of potential force.” He was one of the earliest members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. White died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1918.