



The Frederick Douglass Foundation

"Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe."
Frederick Douglass

Hiram Rhodes Revels, U.S. Senator

Hiram Rhodes Revels (September 27, 1822 – January 16, 1901) was the first African American to serve in the United States Senate. Since he preceded any African American in the House, he was the first African American in the U.S. Congress as well. He represented Mississippi in 1870 and 1871 during Reconstruction. As of 2007, Revels was one of only five African Americans ever to have served in the United States Senate.

Revels was born free in Fayetteville, North Carolina, of a free father of mixed white, black, and possibly a slave mother who was later emancipated. He was tutored by a black woman for his early education. In 1838 he went to live with his brother, Elias B. Revels, in Lincolnton, North Carolina, and was apprenticed as a barber in his brother's shop. Elias Revels died in 1841, and his widow, Mary Revels, turned over her assets to Hiram before she remarried.

He attended the Union County Quaker Seminary in Indiana, and from 1856-57, Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. He also studied at a black seminary in Ohio. Revels was ordained a minister in 1845. As a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Revels preached in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas, and Maryland in the 1850s. "At times, I met with a great deal of opposition," he later recalled. "I was imprisoned in Missouri in 1854 for preaching the gospel to Negroes, though I was never subjected to violence." In 1845 he became a minister in Baltimore, Maryland and set up a private school.

As a chaplain Revels helped raise two black Union regiments during the Civil War in Maryland and Missouri, and took part at the battle of Vicksburg in Mississippi.

In 1865, Revels returned to his ministry and was assigned briefly to AME churches in Leavenworth, Kansas, and New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1866, he was given a permanent pastorate in Natchez, Mississippi, where he settled with his wife and five daughters, continued his ministerial work, and founded schools for black children.

During Reconstruction in 1868, Revels was elected alderman in Natchez, and in 1869 he was elected to represent Adams County in the Mississippi State Senate. As Lynch reports, "so far as known he [Revels] had never voted, had never attended a political meeting, and of course, had never made a political speech. But he was a colored man, and presumed to be a Republican, and believed to be a man of ability and considerably above the average in point of intelligence." [Lynch 1913] In January 1870, Revels gave a remarkable opening prayer to the legislature. As Lynch says, "That prayer,—one of the most impressive and eloquent prayers that had ever been delivered in the Senate Chamber,—made Revels a United States Senator. He made a profound impression upon all who heard him. It impressed those who heard it that Revels was not only a man of great natural ability but that he was also a man of superior attainments." 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.

National Mailing Address

P.O. Box 50273 * Washington, DC 20091
www.FrederickDouglassFoundation.com



The Frederick Douglass Foundation

"Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe."
Frederick Douglass

The election of Revels was met with opposition from Southern conservative Democrats who cited the Dred Scott Decision which was considered by many to have been a central cause of the American Civil War. They argued that 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 and white ancestry, and therefore exempt, they said, and had been a citizen all his life. This argument prevailed, and 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.

U.S. Senator

Revels spoke for compromise and moderation. A vigorous advocate of racial equality, Revels tried to reassure Senators about the capability of blacks. In his maiden speech to the Senate on March 16, 1870, in a plea to reinstate the black legislators of the Georgia General Assembly who had been illegally ousted by white representatives, he said, "I maintain that the past record of my race is a true index of the feelings which today animate them. They aim not to elevate themselves by sacrificing one single interest of their white fellow citizens"

He served on both the Committee on Education and Labor and the Committee on the District of Columbia. 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 replaces Jefferson Davis in Senate. Harper's Weekly Feb 19, 1870

Revels's term lasted one year, February 1870 to March 3, 1871. He quietly, persistently--although for the most part unsuccessfully--worked for equality. He spoke against an amendment proposed by Senator Allen G. Thurman (D-Ohio) to keep the schools of Washington, D.C., segregated. 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.

Revels was praised in the newspapers for his oratorical abilities. His conduct in the Senate, along with that of the other African Americans who had been seated in the House of Representatives, also prompted a white contemporary, James G. Blaine, to say, "The colored men who took their seats in both Senate and House were as a rule studious, earnest, ambitious men, whose public conduct would be honorable to any race"

National Mailing Address

P.O. Box 50273 * Washington, DC 20091
www.FrederickDouglassFoundation.com



The Frederick Douglass Foundation

"Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe."
Frederick Douglass

College president

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. In 1873, Revels took a leave of absence from Alcorn to serve as Mississippi's secretary of state ad interim.

He was dismissed from Alcorn in 1874 when he campaigned against the reelection of Governor of Mississippi Adelbert Ames. He was reappointed in 1876 by the new Democratic administration and served until his retirement in 1882.

On Nov. 6, 1875, Revels, as a Republican wrote a letter to Republican President Ulysses S. Grant that was widely reprinted. Revels denounced Ames and the Carpetbaggers for manipulating the Black vote for personal benefit, and for keeping alive wartime hatreds:

Since reconstruction, the masses of my people have been, as it were, enslaved in mind by unprincipled adventurers, who, caring nothing for country, were willing to stoop to anything no matter how infamous, to secure power to themselves, and perpetuate it..... My people have been told by these schemers, when men have been placed on the ticket who were notoriously corrupt and dishonest, that they must vote for them; that the salvation of the party depended upon it; that the man who scratched a ticket was not a Republican. This is only one of the many means these unprincipled demagogues have devised to perpetuate the intellectual bondage of my people.... The bitterness and hate created by the late civil strife has, in my opinion, been obliterated in this state, except perhaps in some localities, and would have long since been entirely obliterated, were it not for some unprincipled men who would keep alive the bitterness of the past, and inculcate a hatred between the races, in order that they may aggrandize themselves by office, and its emoluments, to control my people, the effect of which is to degrade them.

Revels remained active in his ministry. For a time, he served as editor of the Southwestern Christian Advocate and taught theology at Shaw College (now Rust College), founded in 1866 in Holly Springs, Mississippi, where Revels and his family made their home. Hiram Revels died on January 16, 1901, while attending a church conference in Aberdeen, Mississippi.

Revel's daughter Susan edited a newspaper in Seattle, Washington. Horace Cayton, co-author of Black Metropolis, and labor leader Revels Cayton were his grandsons.

National Mailing Address
P.O. Box 50273 * Washington, DC 20091
www.FrederickDouglassFoundation.com