Hiram Rhodes Revels
1827–1901

UNITED STATES SENATOR ★ 1870–1871
REPUBLICAN FROM MISSISSIPPI

A freedman his entire life, Hiram Rhodes Revels was the first African American to serve in the U.S. Congress. With his moderate political orientation and oratorical skills honed from years as a preacher, Revels filled a vacant seat in the United States Senate in 1870. Just before the Senate agreed to admit a black man to its ranks on February 25, Republican Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts sized up the importance of the moment: "All men are created equal, says the great Declaration," Sumner roared, "and now a great act attests this verity. Today we make the Declaration a reality. . . . The Declaration was only half established by Independence. The greatest duty remained behind. In assuring the equal rights of all we complete the work."[1]

Hiram Rhodes Revels was born to free parents in Fayetteville, North Carolina, on September 27, 1827. His father worked as a Baptist preacher, and his mother was of Scottish descent. He claimed his ancestors "as far back as my knowledge extends, were free," and, in addition to his Scottish background, he was rumored to be of mixed African and Croatan Indian lineage.[2] In an era when educating black children was illegal in North Carolina, Revels attended a school taught by a free black woman and worked a few years as a barber. In 1844, he moved north to complete his education. Revels attended the Beech Grove Quaker Seminary in Liberty, Indiana, and the Darke County Seminary for black students, in Ohio. In 1845, Revels was ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. His first pastorate was likely in Richmond, Indiana, where he was elected an elder to the AME Indiana Conference in 1849.[3] In the early 1850s, Revels married Phoebe A. Bass, a free black woman from Ohio, and they had six daughters.[4]

Revels traveled throughout the country, carrying out religious work and educating fellow African Americans in Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Although Missouri forbade free blacks to live in the state for fear they would instigate uprisings, Revels took a pastorate at an AME Church in St. Louis in 1853, noting that the law was "seldom enforced." However, Revels later revealed he had to be careful because of restrictions on his movements. "I sedulously refrained from doing anything that would incite slaves to run away from their masters," he recalled. "It being understood that my object was to preach the gospel to them, and improve their moral and spiritual condition even slave holders were tolerant of me."[5] Despite his cautiousness, Revels was imprisoned for preaching to the black community in 1854. Upon his release, he accepted a position with the Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland, working alongside his brother, Willis Revels, also an AME pastor. Hiram Revels was the principal of a black school in Baltimore and subsequently attended Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, graduating in 1857. He was one of the few college-educated black men in the United States.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Revels helped recruit two black regiments from Maryland. In 1862, when black soldiers were permitted to fight, he served as the chaplain for a black regiment in campaigns in Vicksburg and Jackson, Mississippi. In 1863, Revels returned to St. Louis, where he established a freedmen's school. At the end of hostilities, Revels served in a church in Leavenworth, Kansas. While traveling in Kansas, Revels and his family were asked to sit in the smoking car rather than the car for first-class ticket holders. Revels protested that the language in the smoking car was too coarse for his wife and children, and the conductor finally relented. Revels served in churches in Louisville, Kentucky, and New Orleans, Louisiana, before settling in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1866.

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Before the Civil War, fewer than 1,000 free black Mississippians had access to a basic education. Thus, leadership from freedmen such as Revels became vital to the Republican Party for rallying the new electorate in the postwar years.[6] It was through his work in education that Revels became involved in politics, taking his first elected position as a Natchez alderman in 1868. He entered politics reluctantly, fearing racial friction and interference with his religious work, but he quickly won over blacks and whites with his moderate and compassionate political opinions. In 1869, encouraged to run by a friend, future Representative John Roy Lynch, Revels won a seat in the Mississippi state senate.[7] Under the newly installed Reconstruction government, Revels was one of more than 30 African Americans among the state's 140 legislators.[8] Upon his election, he wrote a friend in Leavenworth, Kansas: "We are in the midst of an exciting canvass. . . . I am working very hard in politics as well as in other matters. We are determined that Mississippi shall be settled on a basis of justice and political and legal equality."[9] A little-known politician, Revels attracted the attention of fellow legislators when he gave a moving prayer on the opening day of the session.

The primary task of the newly elected state senate was to fill U.S. Senate seats. In 1861, Democrat Albert Brown and future Confederate President Jefferson Davis both vacated Mississippi's U.S. Senate seats when the state seceded from the Union.[10] When their terms expired in 1865 and 1863, respectively, their seats were not filled and remained vacant. In 1870, the new Mississippi state legislature wished to elect a black man to fill the remainder of one term, due to expire in 1871 for the seat once held by Brown, but was determined to fill the other unexpired term, ending in 1875, with a white candidate.[11] Black legislators agreed to the deal, believing, as Revels recalled, that an election of one of their own would "be a weakening blow against color line prejudice." The Democratic minority also endorsed the plan, hoping a black Senator would "seriously damage the Republican Party."[12] After three days and seven ballots, on January 20, 1870, the Mississippi state legislature voted 85 to 15 to seat Hiram Revels in Brown's former seat. They chose Union General Adelbert Ames to fill Davis's former seat.

Revels arrived in Washington at the end of January 1870, but could not present his credentials until Mississippi was readmitted to the United States on February 23. Senate Republicans sought to swear in Revels immediately afterwards, but Senate Democrats were determined to block the effort. Led by Senator Garrett Davis of Kentucky and Senator Willard Saulsbury of Delaware, the Democrats claimed Revels's election was null and void, arguing that Mississippi was under military rule and lacked a civil government to confirm his election. Others claimed Revels was not a U.S. citizen until the passage of the 14th Amendment in 1868 and was therefore ineligible to become a U.S. Senator. Senate Republicans rallied to his defense. Though Revels would not fill Davis's seat, the symbolism of a black man's admission to the Senate after the departure of the former President of the Confederacy was not lost on Radical Republicans. Nevada Senator James Nye underlined the significance of this event: "[Jefferson Davis] went out to establish a government whose cornerstone should be the oppression and perpetual enslavement of a race because their skin differed in color from his," Nye declared. "Sir, what a magnificent spectacle of retributive justice is witnessed here today! In the place of that proud, defiant man, who marched out to trample under foot the Constitution and the laws of the country he had sworn to support, comes back one of that humble race whom he would have enslaved forever to take and occupy his seat upon this floor."[13] On the afternoon of February 25, the Senate voted 48 to 8 to seat Revels, who subsequently received assignments to the Committee on Education and Labor and the Committee on the District of Columbia.

Although Revels viewed himself as "a representative of the State, irrespective of color," he also represented freedmen and, as such, received petitions from black men and women from all states.[14] His sense that he represented his entire race was evident in his maiden speech, in which

he spoke in favor of reinstating black legislators forced from office in Georgia. In April 1868, Georgia voters had ratified the state's constitution, enfranchising African Americans and thus, under the terms of Congressional Reconstruction, taking a necessary step toward the state's re-admission to the Union. In the same election, Georgians sent 29 black legislators to the state house of representatives and three to the state senate. Yet, when the legislature met in July, moderate white Republicans joined Democrats in both chambers to unseat the black members, arguing that the state constitution did not permit black officeholders. Spurred to action, black Georgians appealed to Congress for federal intervention before Georgia was readmitted to the Union. On March 16, 1870, before a packed chamber and a gallery filled with black men and women, Revels argued that the North and the Republican Party owed Georgian black legislators their support: "I remarked that I rose to plead for protection for the defenseless race that now send their delegation to the seat of Government to sue for that which this Congress alone can secure to them. And here let me say further, that the people of the North owe to the colored race a deep obligation that is no easy matter to fulfill."[15] In his speech, Revels professed his loyalty to and faith in the Republican Party, claiming, "the Republican party is not inflamed, as some would . . . have the country believe, against the white population of the South. Its borders are wide enough for all truly loyal men to find within them some peace and repose from the din and discord of angry faction."[16] The Georgia legislature eventually agreed to a congressional mandate reinstating the legislators as a requirement for re-entry into the Union in July 1870.[17]

Revels also favored universal amnesty for former Confederates, requiring only their sworn loyalty to the Union. "I am in favor of removing the disabilities of those upon whom they are imposed in the South, just as fast as they give evidence of having become loyal and being loyal," Revels declared. "If you can find one man in the South who gives evidence that he is a loyal man, and gives that evidence in the fact that he has ceased to denounce the laws of Congress as unconstitutional, has ceased to oppose them, and respects them and favors the carrying of them out, I am in favor of removing his disabilities."[18] Revels's support for the bill, which eventually passed, solidified his reputation as a political moderate.

Although Revels sided with Radical Republicans in opposing Ohio Senator Allen Thurman's amendment perpetuating segregated schools in the District of Columbia, his views on social integration of blacks and whites were less sanguine than those of his colleagues. Revels clearly rejected legal separation of the races, believing it led to animosity between blacks and whites, but he did not view forced social mixing as desirable or necessary. He cited mixed-race churches in northern cities, where a congregation would worship together on Sundays but part ways for the remainder of the week. In one of his most gripping floor speeches, he said: "I find that the prejudice in this country to color is very great, and I sometimes fear that it is on the increase. . . . If the nation should take a step for the encouragement of this prejudice against the colored race, can they have any grounds upon which to predicate a hope that Heaven will smile upon them and prosper them?"[19] As a former teacher, Revels appreciated the need to educate freed slaves, claiming, "The colored race can be built up and assisted . . . in acquiring property, in becoming intelligent, valuable, useful citizens, without one hair upon the head of any white man being harmed."[20] Revels believed the abolition of segregation statutes would result in less prejudice, saying, "Let lawmakers cease to make the difference, let school trustees and school boards cease to make the difference, and the people will soon forget."[21]

With mixed results, Revels also promoted Black Americans' civil rights by less conventional means. In May 1870, he startled the military establishment when he nominated black candidate Michael Howard to the U.S. Army Military Academy at West Point, long a bastion of southern white gentlemen. Revels knew Howard's parents, former slaves, and Howard's father had served in the state legislature. Critics claimed Revels callously and publicly

humiliated the youth, who had little formal education and was not admitted to West Point, and supporters claimed the school administration's prejudice had blocked Howard's entrance.[22] Additionally, Revels successfully appealed to the War Department on behalf of black mechanics from Baltimore who were barred from working at the U.S. Navy Yard in early 1871, an accomplishment he recalled with great pride.[23]

After the expiration of his Senate term on March 3, 1871, Revels declined several patronage positions, offered by President Ulysses S. Grant at the recommendation of Senators Oliver Morton of Indiana and Zachariah Chandler of Michigan. He returned to Mississippi to become the first president of Alcorn University (formerly Oakland College), named for his political ally Governor James Alcorn. Located in Rodney, Mississippi, Alcorn University was the first land-grant school in the United States for black students.[24] Revels took a leave of absence in 1873 to serve as Mississippi's interim secretary of state after the sudden death of his friend James Lynch. During this period, Revels grew more critical of the corruption in the Republican Party, and he resigned from his position at Alcorn in 1874 to avoid being removed by his political rival and former Senate colleague, then-Mississippi Governor Adelbert Ames. Revels returned to the ministry, taking a pastorate at a church in Holly Springs, Mississippi. In the violent and controversial 1875 election campaign, he supported several Democrats. In 1876, when a U.S. Senate select committee questioned him about the well-documented fraud and violence in the previous year's election, Revels testified that to the best of his knowledge, conditions had been relatively peaceful and he was unaware of any widespread violence. His statement was met with skepticism by many Mississippi black voters. Revels returned to his former position as president of Alcorn University in July 1876. He also edited the *Southwestern Christian Advocate* newspaper, the official organ of the AME Church. Revels retired in 1882 and returned to his former church in Holly Springs. He remained active in the religious community, teaching theology at Shaw University (later Rust College) in Holly Springs, Mississippi, and serving as the AME's district superintendent. He died of a paralytic stroke in Aberdeen, Mississippi, on January 16, 1901, while attending a religious conference.

FOR FURTHER READING

Lawson, Elizabeth. *The Gentleman From Mississippi: Our First Negro Representative, Hiram R. Revels* (New York: privately printed, 1960).

"Revels, Hiram Rhodes," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000166.

Thompson, Julius E. *Hiram R. Revels, 1827–1901: A Biography* (New York: Arno Press, 1982).

_____. "Hiram Rhodes Revels, 1827–1901: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of Negro History* 79 (Summer 1994): 297–303.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

New York Public Library (New York, NY) Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. *Papers:* ca. 1870–1948, one linear foot. The Hiram Revels Collection consists principally of a scrapbook of news clippings in addition to biographical articles about Revels. The scrapbook (1870–1893) discusses Revels as a U.S. Senator, pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and president of Alcorn University. It also describes local events and contains homilies and miscellany as well as some letters to Revels and programs and invitations. The collection includes several letters from Revels to his family (1870–1900); a biographical sketch about Revels written in the first person, apparently by his daughter, Susan; a typescript of an obituary of Revels; and legal papers regarding the settlement of his estate. There also are letters soliciting information about Revels from Hermann R. Muelder of Knox College, who planned to write an article about him. Obituaries of Susan Revels Cayton complete the collection.

Brown University, John Hay Library (Providence, RI). *Papers:* 1870, one item. A letter from Hiram Revels to Mrs. Philip Allen written on March 4, 1870.

Library of Congress (Washington, DC) Manuscript Division. *Papers:* In the Carter G. Woodson Papers, ca. 1736–1974, 21.2 linear feet. Persons represented include Hiram Revels.

Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, MS) *Papers:* In the Congressmen's Files, 1815–1979, 2003. Persons represented include Hiram Revels.

NOTES

1 *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 41st Cong., 2nd sess. (25 February 1870): 1567.

2 Elizabeth Lawson, *The Gentleman From Mississippi: Our First Negro Representative, Hiram R. Revels* (New York: privately printed, 1960): 8; "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection of Negro Papers and Related Documents, box 11, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereinafter referred to as LC) Revels's parents' names are not known.

3 Revels's travels took him to as many as eight states before the Civil War. It is difficult to determine in which state he began his ministry. See Kenneth H. Williams, "Revels, Hiram Rhoades," *American National Biography* 18 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 367–369 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*). Williams is one of the few historians to spell Revels's middle name "Rhoades." In his handwritten autobiography, Revels lists several states where he ministered, Indiana being the first; see "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection, LC.

4 Revels's daughter, Susan—the only one of his children whose name is known—edited a black newspaper in Seattle, Washington.

5 "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection, LC.

6 Julius E. Thompson, "Hiram Rhodes Revels, 1827–1901: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of Negro History* 79 (Summer 1994): 298.

7 "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection, LC.

8 Historians disagree about the number of black Mississippi state senators elected in 1869 (figures range from 34 to 40). See Kenneth Potts, "Hiram Rhoades Revels," in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 145; Lawson, *The Gentleman From Mississippi*: 14; Williams, "Revels, Hiram Rhoades," *ANB*; Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 3.

9 Quoted in Lawson, *The Gentleman From Mississippi*: 13.

10 U.S. Senators were selected by state legislatures until 1913, when the adoption of the 17th Amendment required their direct election.

11 For more about the chronological order of United States Senators from Mississippi, see Senate Historical Office, "U.S. Senators from Mississippi," available at http://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/senators/one_item_and_teasers/mississippi.htm (accessed 5 September 2007). See also, *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–2005* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006): 180.

12 "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection, LC.

13 *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 41st Cong., 2nd sess. (23 February 1870): 1513. The enthusiasm with which Republicans in Congress and the media heralded Revels's admission to the Senate inspired the erroneous story common in the historical record that Revels took Davis's former seat instead of Brown's. See, for example, Gath, "Washington," 17 March 1870, *Chicago Tribune*: 2; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 5–6; Stephen Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 320.

14 Quoted in Lawson, *The Gentleman From Mississippi*: 16, 22–23.

15 *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 41st Cong., 2nd sess. (16 March 1870): 1986–1988. For an indication of the number of African Americans in the gallery for Revels's maiden speech, see "By Telegraph," 15 March 1870, *Atlanta Constitution*: 2.

16 *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 41st Cong., 2nd sess. (16 March 1870): 1986–1988.

17 John M. Matthews, "Negro Republicans in the Reconstruction of Georgia," in Donald G. Nieman, ed., *The Politics of Freedom: African Americans and the Political Process During Reconstruction* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994): 253–268; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935 under the title *Black Reconstruction*; New York: Free Press, 1998): 500–504 (citations are to the Free Press edition).

18 *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 41st Cong., 2nd sess. (17 May 1870): 3520. Revels was so adamant about clarifying his position on amnesty, he reprinted this speech in his unpublished autobiography. See "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection, LC.

19 *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 41st Cong., 3rd sess. (8 February 1871): 1059–1060.

20 Ibid.

21 Quoted in Lawson, *The Gentleman From Mississippi*: 41.

22 Michael Howard was not admitted to West Point because he failed the entrance exam. See Williams, "Revels, Hiram Rhoades," *ANB*. See also, for example, "West Point," 28 May 1870, *New York Times*: 4.

23 See "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection, LC.

24 Revels noted that the state legislature tried to name the school after him, but he insisted it remain named for the governor. See "Autobiography of Hiram Revels," Carter G. Woodson Collection, LC.

As a former teacher, Revels appreciated the need to educate freed slaves, claiming, "The colored race can be built up and assisted . . . in acquiring property, in becoming intelligent, valuable, useful citizens, without one hair upon the head of any white man being harmed."