



George Henry White

1852–1918

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1897–1901
REPUBLICAN FROM NORTH CAROLINA

George H. White's bold legislative proposals combating disfranchisement and mob violence in the South distinguished him from his more reserved contemporaries. The lone African-American Representative at the dawn of the 20th century, White spoke candidly on the House Floor, confronting Booker T. Washington's call to work within the segregated system. The onslaught of white supremacy in his home state assured White that to campaign for a third term would be fruitless, and he departed the chamber on March 3, 1901. It would be 28 years before another black Representative set foot in the Capitol. "This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress," White declared in his final months as a Representative, "but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up someday and come again."¹

George Henry White was born in Rosindale, North Carolina, on December 18, 1852. His father, Wiley F. White, was a free, working-class farmer. His mother, Mary, was a slave.² White boasted Native-American and Irish ancestry as well as his African heritage and was notably light-skinned.³ George White had one sister, Flora. At the end of the Civil War, the young teenager helped out on the family farm and assisted in the family's funeral home business while intermittently attending public schools in Columbus County, North Carolina. In 1873, he entered Howard University in Washington, DC, graduating in 1877.⁴ White joined the North Carolina bar in 1879, and served as the principal at several black public schools. He married Fannie B. Randolph in 1879 and, six years after her death in 1880, he married Cora Lena Cherry. White had four children: a daughter, Della, with his first wife, and two daughters and a son—Mary Adelyne, Beatrice Odessa, and George Henry White, Jr.—with his second wife.⁵

White's political career began with his election to the

North Carolina house of representatives in 1880. That same year, he served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention. White initially focused on legislation pertaining to education, securing funding and authorization to open four black normal schools and provide training for black teachers. After establishing a second residence in Tarboro, North Carolina, he was elected solicitor and prosecuting attorney in 1886 in the "Black Second" district, a boot-shaped entity with a large black majority, winding from the Virginia border to the southern coast.⁶ White considered seeking national office at this point but decided to garner recognition among district voters through a favorable record as a solicitor.

In 1888 and 1890, White reluctantly deferred candidacy for the district's congressional seat to his brother-in-law Representative Henry Cheatham, whose calculated, conciliatory demeanor contrasted with White's forthright, demanding, and unyielding personality.⁷ Cheatham lost his 1892 re-election campaign, and though the two men had an uneasy relationship, they were not outright political enemies until White made a serious bid for the "Black Second" congressional seat in 1894.⁸ Cheatham planned to capitalize on the redistricting that added a large number of black voters in north-central Vance and Craven counties to the existing district. Amicability between the brothers-in-law disintegrated until 1898, when Cheatham relented, supporting White for a second term.⁹

In addition to the fractious family rivalry, the Populist Party—a national third party made up primarily of disenchanting and economically depressed farmers—continued to challenge Republican political hegemony in the "Black Second." The volatile political situation divided delegates at the hotly contested 1894 Republican district convention. After 13 ballots, both White and Cheatham emerged claiming the nomination.¹⁰ After both candidates



canvassed the district for several months, the two men brought their still-undecided case to Washington, DC, before the Republican National Committee (RNC).¹¹ After hearing each man's arguments, a seven-member RNC committee agreed to support Cheatham.¹² But Cheatham failed to capture the interest of the Populists; in a three-way general election, the former black Representative lost handily to incumbent Democratic Representative Frederick A. Woodard and a third Populist candidate who siphoned off a large fraction of the white Republican vote.

Cheatham's second consecutive loss sank his political career, leaving George White the district's favored African-American son. In 1896, White handily defeated Cheatham for the nomination. Possessing the full support of the Republican Party, White appealed to the Populists to avoid suffering Cheatham's fate in a three-way election. White distanced himself from the national Republican adherence to the gold standard, embracing the Populist platform calling for the free coinage of silver.¹³ His chances for election improved greatly when Republican and Populist district leaders agreed on a "fusion" plan in the fall of 1896. White also benefited when a friendly 1894 state legislature reversed many of the Democratic election laws that impeded African-American voters—each of the three parties provided a judge and registrar at every polling place to ensure a fair election.¹⁴ Turnout among black voters in North Carolina rose to record levels of more than 85 percent.¹⁵ White defeated Representative Woodard with 52 percent of the vote. Woodard, who took 41 percent of the vote, was most hampered by rebel Populist candidate D. S. Moss, who siphoned off 7 percent of the vote.¹⁶

The only African American in the 55th Congress (1897–1899), George White was part of a large Republican majority that was swept into office on the coattails of presidential victor William McKinley.¹⁷ He received a seat on the Agriculture Committee, an assignment that recognized the large number of farmers among his constituents.

The first order of business in the 55th Congress, the protectionist Dingley Tariff, allowed George White to

support a major plank in the Republican platform. He voted in favor of the high tariff to protect eastern North Carolina's economically depressed timber industry. White missed the vote to go to war against Spain on April 19, 1898, while traveling from North Carolina. The following morning, he announced on the House Floor that he supported the invasion of Cuba, and he later declared his unqualified support for the colonial acquisition of Cuba and the Philippines.¹⁸ White also missed the vote to annex the Hawaiian Islands, probably intentionally. Critical of the apparent mistreatment of the native Hawaiians, White remained loyal to Republican foreign-policy objectives out of a desire to avoid conflict with his colleagues who overwhelmingly supported annexation.¹⁹ White later offered an amendment to legislation creating the Hawaiian territorial government, aimed at ensuring the voting rights of Hawaiian residents.²⁰ White once used the subject of U.S. imperialism to open a discussion about race issues in his native South.²¹

White's focus in Congress was not late-19th century foreign policy debates but defending the civil rights of his black constituents. For instance, White offered a resolution providing relief for the widow and surviving children of a black postmaster murdered in Lake City, South Carolina. The man and his infant daughter were killed by a white mob. Though the resolution was read aloud on the House Floor, White never spoke at length about the tragedy because Representative Charles Bartlett of Georgia objected to his request to elaborate.²² White also sought to commission an all-black artillery unit in the U.S. Army. At the end of the session, White called on President McKinley to discuss honoring black soldiers fighting in the Spanish–American War. Finally, White unsuccessfully sought \$15,000 in federal funding for an exhibit on black achievement at the 1900 Paris Exposition.

Returning home to campaign for re-election, George White was the primary target of white supremacist politicians, who feared a renewal of the Republican–Populist political fusion. The *Raleigh News and Observer* was particularly scathing, alleging White was the

mastermind behind the “Negro domination” of local politics and businesses and citing as proof his refusal to give his seat to a white Republican.²³ White armed himself with endorsements. Republican colleague George Southwick of New York published a glowing endorsement in the African-American newspaper the *Colored American*.²⁴ District Republicans expressed solidarity with White by renominating him without opposition in May 1898.²⁵ Patronage became a pivotal issue in the election. White defended his frequent appointment of black men to patronage positions at the Republican state convention in July 1898, noting, “I am not the only negro who holds office. There are others. . . . The Democrats talk about the color line and the Negro holding office. I invite the issue.”²⁶

Though White received thunderous applause, those few sentences elicited vicious replies from North Carolina Democratic newspapers, declaring White had started an all-out race war. White’s speech also inspired the White Government Union, led by former Representative Furnifold Simmons, to organize unity among white voters. Moreover, White’s strong language at the convention infuriated white Populists, who broke from standing fusion agreements and nominated their own candidate, James B. Lloyd.²⁷ The final week of campaigning descended into chaos. After Lloyd refused to run on a platform of white supremacy, William Fountain added his name to the ballot as an Independent Populist. Fountain sought to swing the Populist Party against George White.²⁸ South Carolina Senator (and former governor) Ben Tillman and his famous Red Shirts rode into North Carolina to intimidate black voters—though White refuted a newspaper account that he was trapped aboard a train by Red Shirts on a campaign stop in Kinston.²⁹ Black voter turnout was low, but the confusion of a four-way race divided the vote in White’s favor.³⁰ The post-election ramifications in North Carolina were tremendous. White supremacists in Wilmington, the biggest metropolis in the largely rural state, incited race riots in the city as an excuse to seize power from a fusion city government. Eleven black men

were killed, and 25 were injured.³¹

The bloody Wilmington riots troubled White as he returned to Washington for the final session of the 55th Congress, and he vented his frustration in his first substantive floor speech, on January 26, 1899. During a debate to extend the standing army after victory against Spain, White abruptly changed the subject to disfranchisement, arguing in favor of the bold proposal that states with discriminatory laws should have decreased representation in the U.S. House, proportionate to the number of eligible voters they prevented from going to the polls. “If we are unworthy of suffrage, if it is necessary to maintain white supremacy,” White chastised his colleagues, “then you ought to have the benefit only of those who are allowed to vote, and the poor men, whether they be black or white, who are disfranchised ought not go into representation of the district of the state.” Republicans greeted his speech with long applause.³²

The 56th Congress (1899–1901) convened with a Republican majority, and White was given a second assignment on the District of Columbia Committee, which administered the capital city’s government. But White’s second term was focused on his pursuit of anti-lynching legislation, despite President McKinley’s lack of support. On January 20, 1900, White introduced an unprecedented bill to make lynching a federal crime, subjecting those who participated in mob violence to potential capital punishment—a sentence equivalent to that for treason.³³ White’s anti-lynching bill subsequently died in the Judiciary Committee.

White announced his intention not to run for renomination to the 57th Congress (1901–1903) in a speech on June 30, 1900, and declared his plans to leave his home. Several factors contributed to his decision. In 1899, the North Carolina state legislature followed the lead of neighboring states and passed new registration laws further restricting black voters. White also lost popularity within his own party. White Republicans resented his seemingly radical disfranchisement legislation and anti-lynching proposals, claiming he had belligerently “drawn

the color line in this district.”³⁴ Without strong Republican support, White had little chance of defeating his formidable Democratic opponent Claude Kitchin, scion of one of the most politically powerful families in the state.³⁵ In addition, White was discouraged because noticeably fewer black delegates attended the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia in mid-June. Compounding his disappointment, the convention rejected the addition of anti-lynching and franchise protection planks to the national party platform.³⁶ White noticed the strain on his family, particularly his sickly wife, Cora, for whom he believed another campaign would be fatal. “I cannot live in North Carolina and be a man and be treated as a man,” he lamented to the Chicago *Daily Tribune*.³⁷ He told the *New York Times*, the “restrictive measure against the negro is not really political. The political part of it is a mere subterfuge and is a means for the general degradation of the negro.” He encouraged southern black families to migrate west and remain farmers, not settling in colonies, but “los[ing] themselves among the people of the country. . . . Then their children will be better educated.”³⁸ On January 29, 1901, White gave his famous valedictory address to the 56th Congress, predicting the return of African Americans to Congress. His speech, which filled more than four pages in the *Congressional Record*, pleaded for respect and equality for American blacks. “The only apology that I have to make for the earnestness with which I have spoken,” White concluded, “is that I am pleading for the life, the liberty, the future happiness, and the manhood suffrage of one-eighth of the entire population of the United States.”³⁹

George White began a second successful career, as a lawyer and an entrepreneur. He opened a law practice in Washington, DC, in 1901. At the same time, he organized a town for black citizens to show that “self-sufficient blacks could not only survive but flourish, if . . . left alone in a neutral, healthy environment.” Dubbed Whitesboro, the town was built on 1,700 acres of land in Cape May, New Jersey, and by 1906, its population had swelled to more than 800 people.⁴⁰ In 1905, White left Washington to found another law practice in Philadelphia. He also

opened the People’s Savings Bank, to help potential black home and business owners. Though he never again sought political office, White actively supported the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, founded in 1909, and was a benefactor of the Frederick Douglass Hospital in Philadelphia. A year after his bank failed, George White died in Philadelphia on December 28, 1918.

FOR FURTHER READING

Anderson, Eric. *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872–1901* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

Justesen, Benjamin R. *George Henry White: An Even Chance in the Race of Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

Reid, George W. “Four in Black: North Carolina’s Black Congressmen, 1874–1901,” *Journal of Negro History* 64 (Summer 1979): 229–243.

“White, George Henry,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000372>.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 56th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 January 1901): 1638.
- 2 Benjamin R. Justesen, *George Henry White: An Even Chance in the Race of Life* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001): 2–3. Mary’s surname is not known.
- 3 Eric Anderson, “White, George Henry,” *American National Biography* 23 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 205–206 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 4 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 35–36.
- 5 George W. Reid, “Four in Black: North Carolina’s Black Congressmen, 1874–1901,” *Journal of Negro History* 64 (Summer 1979): 235. Beatrice Odessa White (commonly referred to by her middle name) died in infancy in 1892; see Justesen, *George Henry*

- White*: 166.
- 6 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990): 97–99.
- 7 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 151–152.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 9 Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913*: 100–102; Justesen, *George Henry White*: 257–258.
- 10 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 185. Justesen discusses the proceedings of the 1894 Republican district convention at length; see 190–195.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 188–189. Some sources note that White withdrew from the race voluntarily to avoid fracturing the Republican Party, though other sources indicate that his supporters abandoned him for Cheatham before his withdrawal; see, for example, Maurice Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 161.
- 13 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 206.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 210; see also H. Leon Prather, Sr., *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Rutherford, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1984): 34–35.
- 15 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 211.
- 16 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 318. Dubin spells Woodard’s name “Woodward.”
- 17 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 213; There were two George Whites in the 55th Congress. Republican George Elon White of Illinois also was re-elected to his second (and final) term; see “White, George Elon,” online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000371>.
- 18 *Congressional Record*, House, 55th Cong., 2nd sess. (14 April 1898): 4086; *Congressional Record*, House, 55th Cong., 3rd sess. (26 January 1899): 1124.
- 19 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 235.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 56th Cong., 1st sess. (5 April 1900): 3814.
- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 56th Cong., 1st sess. (23 February 1900): 2151.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 55th Cong., 2nd sess. (3 March 1898): 2427.
- 23 Anderson, “White, George Henry,” *ANB*.
- 24 A synopsis of Southwick’s endorsement is found in Justesen, *George Henry White*: 233–234.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 232.
- 26 Quoted in Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 163; and Justesen, *George Henry White*: 238. Both sources quote White slightly differently. Various forms of this speech were printed in newspapers throughout North Carolina. For a discussion of the different accounts, see Justesen, *George Henry White*: 238–241.
- 27 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 241.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 246.
- 29 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 163. Justesen notes that most accounts of intimidation by Red Shirts were exaggerated or falsified; see Justesen, *George Henry White*: 245.
- 30 Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1973; reprint of the 1951 edition): 163–164.
- 31 Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina*: 163–164; John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 8th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000): 288. For more on this topic, see the extensive report of the Wilmington Race Riot Commission, published in 2006: <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/1898-wrrc/default.htm> (accessed 1 December 2007).
- 32 *Congressional Record*, House, 55th Cong., 3rd sess. (26 January 1899): 1125; Justesen, *George Henry White*: 263.
- 33 Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina*: 86.
- 34 Quoted in Justesen, *George Henry White*: 290; the quote is attributed to white district leader Hiram L. Grant.
- 35 Claude Kitchin’s father, William Hodges (Buck) Kitchin, served the district in the 46th Congress (1879–1880). Claude’s brother, William Walton Kitchin, was finishing up his second term representing a central North Carolina district. Claude and William Walton Kitchin’s nephew (and William Hodges Kitchin’s grandson), Alvin Paul Kitchin, served in Congress from 1957 to 1962. For more on these individuals, see the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov>. Claude himself later became the Democratic Leader in the House, serving as Majority Leader in the 64th and 65th Congress (1915–1919); see “Majority & Minority Leaders,” Office of the Clerk, available at http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/leaders.html.
- 36 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 292–293.
- 37 “Sees No Hope In South,” 26 August 1900, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 7.
- 38 “Southern Negro’s Plight,” 26 August 1900, *New York Times*: 8.
- 39 *Congressional Record*, House, 56th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 January 1901): 1638.
- 40 Justesen, *George Henry White*: 356.