



Arthur Wergs Mitchell

1883–1968

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1935–1943
DEMOCRAT FROM ILLINOIS

The first African American elected to Congress as a Democrat, Arthur Mitchell served four terms in the U.S. House, illustrating a shift among black voters, who traditionally backed Republican candidates. Throughout his congressional career, Mitchell faithfully supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal legislation that attracted many black voters during the Great Depression. As the only black Representative between 1935 and 1943, Mitchell was expected by African Americans in his Chicago district and across the country to use his political power to represent his race. Despite the pressure he faced to combat discrimination and promote civil rights, the Illinois Representative remarked upon taking office, “I don’t plan to spend my time fighting out the question of whether a Negro may eat his lunch at the Capitol or whether he may be shaved in the House barber shop,” an approach he adhered to during his tenure in Congress.¹

The son of former slaves Taylor Mitchell and Ammar Patterson, Arthur Wergs Mitchell was born on a farm near Lafayette, Alabama, on December 22, 1883.² He attended public schools and entered Tuskegee Institute in 1897, working his way through college as a farm laborer and an assistant for Booker T. Washington. He taught in rural schools in Georgia and Alabama and attempted to put Washington’s theories on farm management and land ownership into practice by founding the Armstrong Agricultural School in West Butler, Alabama. He served as president of the institution for 10 years. Before being admitted to the bar in Washington, DC, in 1927, Mitchell attended both Columbia and Harvard.³ He practiced law in the nation’s capital, and when he moved to Chicago in 1929, he continued his career as an attorney while also becoming involved in the real estate business.⁴ Mitchell married Eula Mae King, who died in 1910, and then Annie Harris, who died in 1947. One year after the death

of his second wife, he married Clara Smith Mann. He had one son, Arthur Wergs Mitchell, Jr., with his first wife.⁵

Mitchell entered politics as a Republican, but like many Black Americans, shifted his allegiance to the Democratic Party in the early days of the New Deal. In the 1934 Democratic primary for the majority African-American congressional district encompassing Chicago’s South Side, Mitchell squared off against Harry Baker. Mitchell lost to Baker (by fewer than 1,000 votes), but Baker died before the general election, and party leaders in the district selected Mitchell to take his place.⁶ The congressional campaign between Mitchell and Oscar De Priest garnered national attention because both the challenger and the incumbent were African American (De Priest faced white Democratic opponents in three previous general elections).⁷ Mitchell turned the contest against the venerable Republican Representative into a referendum on President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s public-relief policies. Capitalizing on growing support for the New Deal, Mitchell orchestrated an aggressive campaign that forced De Priest to defend the Republican Party, whose influence was waning locally, in part due to Chicago’s Democratic Mayor, Edward J. Kelly, who actively courted African-American voters.⁸ On November 7, 1934, Mitchell narrowly beat De Priest, becoming the first African-American Democrat elected to Congress.⁹ In his three successive elections, Mitchell continued to win by a slim margin—defeating De Priest again in 1936, future Representative William Dawson two years later, and former Illinois State Senator William E. King in 1940—with an average of 53 percent of the vote.¹⁰ Shortly after taking his seat in the 74th Congress on January 3, 1935, Mitchell reiterated one of his campaign promises: “What I am interested in is to help this grand President of ours feed the hungry and clothe



the naked and provide work for the idle of every race and creed.”¹¹ Mitchell was assigned to the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, and retained this position throughout his eight years in the House.

During his congressional career, Mitchell remained a loyal supporter of President Roosevelt and the New Deal.¹² In 1936 the Illinois Representative gave a seconding speech for Roosevelt’s renomination at the Democratic Convention and served as western director of minority affairs for the President’s re-election campaign. As one of Roosevelt’s consistent backers, Mitchell maintained that the New Deal addressed many of the problems faced by “America’s largest and most neglected minority group,” the black populace.¹³ Citing programs such as the Work Projects Administration (WPA; later renamed the Works Progress Administration) and the Public Works Administration (PWA), Mitchell praised the President’s economic answer to the Depression, noting that the New Deal had produced the best conditions for Black Americans since they became free citizens.¹⁴ The WPA constructed thousands of massive public works projects including buildings, roads, bridges, and airports, and oversaw such diverse activities as the Federal Art Project and the Federal Writers’ Project. Led by Harry Hopkins, the agency went to great lengths to treat blacks equally—after 1936, blacks made up 15 to 20 percent of its workforce—and through wages and public works initiatives brought millions of federal dollars to devastated black communities. Likewise, under the direction of Harold Ickes, the PWA hired many African Americans and helped construct public buildings worth millions of dollars in economically depressed black locales.¹⁵ Mitchell also defended Roosevelt’s controversial plan to reorganize the federal judiciary in 1937, noting that blacks had been victimized over the years by unfavorable Supreme Court rulings, and charged that the Court had often used the 14th Amendment to protect large corporations and property holders instead of using it as it was intended: to defend the citizenship rights of blacks.

While in Congress, Mitchell worked to provide

opportunities for Black Americans. Like his predecessor, De Priest, he nominated a number of black candidates for the United States military academies.¹⁶ Mitchell also used his position to draw attention to racial discrimination. He challenged several labor unions for agreeing to contracts that excluded blacks and supported legislation that would outlaw the poll tax. During the Second World War, Mitchell criticized the treatment of black soldiers, remarking that the discrimination endured by African-American troops undermined the U.S. objective “to extend and protect the doctrine of genuine democracy.”¹⁷ Mitchell also repeatedly offered bills that would outlaw racial discrimination in the civil service. Calling the requirement of submitting a photograph for civil service job applications “racial discrimination,” Mitchell proposed that fingerprints be used instead.¹⁸

As the only African American in Congress, Mitchell found himself scrutinized by black leaders and organizations across the country. Criticized for what some perceived as an overly cautious stance toward civil rights, Mitchell was accused of squandering an opportunity to make a significant legislative impact on behalf of his race. A major point of contention was an anti-lynching bill submitted by Mitchell that was considered too lenient by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other civil rights groups.¹⁹ When the House ultimately rejected his measure in favor of one with stricter penalties for offenders, Mitchell remarked, “The authorship of this bill means absolutely nothing as compared with the importance of its passage.”²⁰ Although Mitchell resented claims he could do more to help African Americans, he did not want to be identified solely by his race. “I am not going into Congress as a Negro with a chip on my shoulder thinking I am of an inferior race and that every man’s hand is against me,” he commented shortly after his election to the House. “I am going in as an American citizen, entitled to my rights, no more, no less, and I shall insist on them. I’m going as the representative of all the people of my district.”²¹ During his four terms in Congress, Mitchell worked closely with many of his white colleagues, adopting

a philosophy rooted in cooperation and patience—much like his mentor Booker T. Washington, whom Mitchell hoped to honor by establishing a national shrine.²²

Ironically, Mitchell's greatest contribution to desegregation arguably transpired outside the halls of Congress. In April 1937, Mitchell traveled from Chicago to Hot Springs, Arkansas, on the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad. When the train crossed into Arkansas, a conductor forced Mitchell out of the Pullman car, for which he had two first-class tickets. The Representative rode the rest of the journey in a car designated for black passengers that he described as “filthy and foul smelling.”²³ Following in the footsteps of James E. O'Hara, a black Reconstruction-Era Representative, Mitchell challenged transport segregation. He sued the railroad and filed a complaint with the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), contending that interstate trains should be exempt from the Arkansas law requiring “separate but equal” train accommodations. After the ICC and a federal district court dismissed his complaint, Mitchell made history by joining a select number of sitting Members of Congress to argue a case before the Supreme Court. In April 1941 the high court unanimously held in *Mitchell v. United States et al.* that black passengers had the right to the same accommodations and treatment whites did. Mitchell hailed the decision as a “step in the destruction of Mr. Jim Crow himself,” but the ICC did not prohibit segregation on interstate trains or buses or in the public waiting rooms of railroad or bus stations until 1955.²⁴

Under circumstances his biographer describes as “ambiguous,” Mitchell declined to run for re-nomination to the 78th Congress in 1942.²⁵ Officials in Mayor Kelly's Chicago political organization were angry that Mitchell had defied machine orders in pursuing his lawsuit against a Chicago-based rail company and let Mitchell know they planned to withdraw their support. Democratic officials chose his rival, William Dawson, partially because they believed he would be a better candidate against a potentially tough field of African Americans on the Republican side. Publicly, Mitchell gracefully accepted

his political downfall, claiming (somewhat truthfully) that he was ready for a new phase in his public-service career and that he preferred to improve race relations by working through groups active in the South. After retiring from the House in January 1943, he moved to Petersburg, Virginia, where he had bought a large tract of land, and devoted himself to farming, lecturing, and the activities of organizations such as the Southern Regional Council. He died in Petersburg on May 9, 1968.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Mitchell, Arthur Wergs,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000805>.

Nordin, Dennis. *The New Deal's Black Congressman: A Life of Arthur Wergs Mitchell* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Chicago Historical Society (Chicago, IL). *Papers*: 1898–1968, 30 linear feet. The collection contains correspondence, speeches, news clippings, and other papers of Arthur Mitchell. The papers contain many letters about racial issues, from all over the country. Additional topics include Mitchell's election campaigns against Oscar De Priest and others, service in the House and on the Post Office and Post Roads Committee, anti-lynching legislation, Mitchell's U.S. Supreme Court case concerning discrimination on a railroad, and activities as director of the Western Division of Colored Voters of the Democratic National Campaign Committee during the 1936 presidential election. *Photographs*: ca. 1930–1965 (one box), relate to Mitchell's life and career.



★ ARTHUR WERGS MITCHELL ★

NOTES

- 1 “Arthur Mitchell, an Ex-Lawmaker,” 10 May 1968, *New York Times*: 47.
- 2 Dennis S. Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman: A Life of Arthur Wergs Mitchell* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997): 1.
- 3 “Arthur Mitchell, an Ex-Lawmaker”; Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 21, 33.
- 4 “Arthur W. Mitchell, 85, Dies: 1st Negro Democrat in the House,” 11 May 1968, *Washington Post*: B3; Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 39.
- 5 Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 9–10, 14, 122–123, 283, 290–291.
- 6 “Democrats Pick Flynn as County Clerk Candidate,” 4 August 1934, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 9.
- 7 S. J. Duncan-Clark, “Voters Confused in the Lake States,” 4 November 1934, *New York Times*: E6; “Negro Opposes De Priest,” 29 October 1934, *New York Times*: 2.
- 8 Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 62–63; Janice L. Reiff et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Chicago*; see <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/371.html> (accessed 25 October 2007).
- 9 Arthur Evans, “Later Returns Cut Democrat Gain in Illinois,” 8 November 1934, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 2; “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 10 “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html; Harold Smith, “G.O.P. Candidates See Victory,” 20 October 1940, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: S1.
- 11 “Arthur W. Mitchell, 85, Dies; 1st Negro Democrat in the House.”
- 12 Harold Smith, “Each New Deal Roll Call Gets Mitchell’s ‘Aye!’,” 7 February 1940, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 2.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 76th Cong., 2nd sess. (18 March 1940): 3019.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 3019–3026.
- 15 Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981): 68, 70–71.
- 16 For an example, see “Negro Youth Qualifies, Enters Naval Academy,” 16 June 1936, *New York Times*: 31.
- 17 *Congressional Record*, Appendix, 77th Cong., 2nd sess. (16 July 1942): A2790.
- 18 “Mitchell Protests Race ‘Job Barrier,’” 25 January 1936, *Washington Post*: 2; Carol M. Swain, *Black Faces, Black Interests: The Representation of African Americans in Congress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993): 30–31.
- 19 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 177.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 75th Cong., 1st sess. (1937): 3385; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 179.
- 21 “Arthur Mitchell, an Ex-Lawmaker.”
- 22 “Plans Booker Washington Honor,” 8 September 1937, *New York Times*: 13; *Congressional Record*, House, 77th Cong., 2nd sess. (14 October 1942): 8189.
- 23 “Court Backs Rights of Negro on Trains,” 29 April 1941, *New York Times*: 1; “Mitchell Fights Jim Crow Rule in High Court,” 14 March 1941, *Washington Post*: 25; Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 249–250.
- 24 “Court Backs Rights of Negro on Trains.”
- 25 Nordin, *The New Deal’s Black Congressman*: 247–248.



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