



Hiram Rhodes Revels

Hiram R. Revels

Making History in Congress and in Education

by Victoria McAfee

Hiram R. (Rhodes) Revels, an educator, minister, and politician, was the first African American to serve in the United States Senate. It would be almost 90 years before another African American would be elected to the Senate.

Revels was born September 27, 1827, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, to free parents—an African-American Baptist preacher and a mother of Scottish descent. Hiram was taught by a free African-American teacher for his early education.

Revels moved to Liberty, Indiana, and attended Beech Grove Quaker Seminary, then Darke County Seminary for black students in Ohio. Revels was ordained by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1845 and served in Richmond, Indiana. He married Phoebe A. Bass, and they had six daughters.

Revels became an itinerant preacher, traveling throughout Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee, educating and ministering to African Americans.

Despite the state of Missouri's restrictions against free African Americans living there, Revels started pastoring a St. Louis AME Church in 1853. Revels's ministry never encouraged rebellious activity: "I sedulously refrained from doing anything that would incite slaves to run away... slave holders were tolerant of me . . . my object was to preach the Gospel to them, and improve their moral and spiritual condition." However, Revels was eventually imprisoned for preaching the Gospel to slaves.

After serving his sentence, Revels worked with his brother, Willis, at a Presbyterian church in Baltimore as well as being a principal of an African-American school. He later moved back to Illinois and attended Knox College in Galesburg.

When the Civil War broke out, Revels helped establish black Union regiments in Maryland and Missouri. He served as a chaplain at battles in Vicksburg and Jackson, Mississippi, in 1863.

Revels left the AME church in 1865 and joined the Methodist Episcopal (ME) Church, which offered more opportunities for his work in the South. He served churches in Kansas and Louisiana before pastoring a church in Natchez, Mississippi.

Revels became involved in politics as a Natchez alderman in 1868. His compassion and moderate political opinions won over both blacks and whites.

In 1869, Revels won a seat in the Mississippi State Senate. The next January, he gave a powerful opening prayer in the Mississippi Senate Chamber that impressed the senators. The following February, the impressed Mississippi senators chose Revels to fill a U.S. Senate seat, left vacant when Mississippi seceded. One year was left on the term of that seat.

Revels's appointment caused controversy in Washington, D.C. Senate Democrats, afraid of the new voting power blacks had, moved to block the seating of Revels on technicalities while racist newspapers denounced a black man being in Congress. However, on February 25, 1870, the Senate voted to seat Revels. Massachusetts Republican Senator Charles Sumner declared, "The time has passed for argument. Nothing more need be said. For a long time it has been clear that colored persons must be senators."

Revels's first speech in Congress challenged Georgia's petition to be readmitted to the Union because the state had denied blacks the right to serve in its legislature. While in the Senate, he introduced several bills, presented a number of petitions, and served on the Committee on the District of Columbia and the Committee on Education. Revels called for racial equality, compromise, and moderation, favoring amnesty for former Confederates if they signed an oath of loyalty to the United States. He supported the desegregation of schools and railroads and rejected the separation of the races.

Revels resigned from his Senate seat to become president of the Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College (later Alcorn State University), the first black land grant college in the country. In 1873, Mississippi Governor Adelbert Ames dismissed Revels in a political dispute, but he was reinstated in 1876 due to his popularity with both the students and faculty. He served at the college until his retirement in 1882.

Later in life, Revels served as editor of the Southwestern Christian Advocate newspaper and taught theology at Shaw College. He was a pastor of a Holly Springs, Mississippi, ME church and served as the denomination's district superintendent. Revels died of a paralytic stroke in Aberdeen, Mississippi, on January 16, 1901.

Revels was committed to sharing the Gospel and advocating for the advancement of African Americans through both education and politics.



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