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Printable 14-3: First Black Legislators Set Postwar Georgia on the Right Course

By Michael Thurmond

Note: At the time this was written, then state Rep. Michael Thurmond was chairman of the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus. He is the author of *A Story Untold: Black Men and Women in Athens History and Freedom: Georgia's Antislavery Heritage, 1733–1865*.



Traditionally, the history of African-American Georgians has been condensed into two eras—slavery and the modern civil rights movement. The bridge that links these periods has been omitted from history books in an effort to deny its existence.

Fortunately, there is enough biographical information to piece together some of the contributions of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction blacks. In particular, the black lawmakers who served in the General Assembly from 1868 to 1907 were pioneers who helped lay the legislative foundation for modern Georgia. Their accomplishments are deserving of recognition during Black History Month.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, the federal government made provisions for the Southern states to be readmitted into the Union. The

Reconstruction Acts of 1867 gave Southern blacks the power of the vote for the first time and provided for state conventions to rewrite the constitutions of the Southern states.

On July 4, 1868, 30 newly elected black legislators, aligned with the Republican party, attended their first session of the Georgia General Assembly.

By mid-August, the House of Representatives was involved in a bitter debate concerning the black members' eligibility. Despite an impassioned four-hour speech by black Rep. Henry McNeal Turner, the House voted 82-23 to expel the blacks because of their color.

Shortly afterward, a federal investigation concluded that the expulsion was a violation of the Reconstruction Acts. Because of the probe, Gen. Alfred H. Terry assumed control of Georgia's government, and 18 months after their expulsion, the black legislators regained their seats.

Even though 50 black lawmakers served in the Georgia Legislature from 1868 to 1907, biographical information on most of them is disjointed and sketchy. In many books, only their names and the word "colored" appear.

One must read the work of the late Atlanta University Professor C. A. Bacote or the 1932 Atlanta University master's thesis by Ethel Maude Christler to discover the critical impact of these black lawmakers. Although some of their ideas were rejected at the time, many eventually became law in Georgia.

State Sen. Tunis G. Campbell, Sr., who represented coastal Georgia, and Rep. James Porter of Chatham County introduced the most bills.

Campbell introduced 11 bills from 1868 to 1870, most of which were reported back to the Senate with recommendations for passage.



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He sponsored bills to establish district courts and to create a public education system. He presented a lengthy resolution describing how the money for education was to be secured and allocated. He also wanted to “confer upon churches and other religious organizations the right and power to own . . . and occupy property.”

Porter had an avid interest in religious matters. As early as Feb. 14, 1870, he asked that chaplains be appointed to the House, which passed the measure.

Turner, who represented Bibb County in the House, was probably the most dynamic leader of his time. An African Methodist Episcopal bishop, he was an eloquent orator who had political savvy and a virtually photographic memory. His bill to establish a state police was passed by the House. He also sought, unsuccessfully, to amend the Constitution of Georgia to allow women to vote. And he fought to secure chaplains for convicts and to enforce an act donating lands to the Georgia State Orphans Home.

In addition to the many blacks who competently held seats in the Georgia General Assembly, Jefferson Long of Crawford County was the first black Georgian to become a U.S. congressman, serving a term in the House in 1870–1871.

The threat and the reality of violence were constant companions of early black Georgia politicians.

On Oct. 30, 1869, Rep. A. Colby of Greene County was taken from his bed and beaten because he had visited Atlanta to request military protection for a freedmen’s school in Greensboro. One historian reported that Rep. Alfred Richardson of Athens “was done to death” by the Ku Klux Klan in the fall of 1868. [Rumors of Richardson’s death were widely circulated at the time, but Richardson survived the Klan attack and was reelected to the General Assembly in 1870.]

On Oct. 23, 1870, Malcolm Claiborne, a black state representative from Burke County, became embroiled in a heated argument with Moses H. Bentley, the House messenger. Claiborne accused Bentley of unjustly dismissing a black page and replacing him with a white boy.

Enraged by the accusation, Bentley shot and killed Claiborne on Marietta Street near Henry Grady Square. The House voted immediately to expel Bentley and turn the matter over to local authorities.

By the late 1890s, the Republican party, which had so eagerly embraced blacks after the Civil War, no longer represented their interests. Some prominent blacks, such as Turner, turned to the Democratic party. Others remained loyal to the Republican party but felt increasingly alienated.

W. H. Rodgers of McIntosh County resigned from the Legislature in protest after Georgia lawmakers passed a constitutional amendment to disenfranchise blacks in 1907. He was the last black to serve from 1868 to 1907; his resignation marked the end of an era.

Today, a monument to the first black lawmakers stands on the northwest ground of the Capitol, and Turner’s portrait is on display in front of the House chamber.

The black Georgia lawmakers of the 19th century can be credited with laying the framework for the development of public schools in Georgia. They worked to secure the passage of bills that would enfranchise women, provide equal accommodations for both races on public conveyances, promote prison reform and enfranchise thousands of white men who were barred from voting because they didn’t own property.

The efforts of these lawmakers truly paved the way for the wider democratization of society.