

BLACK AMERICANS IN CONGRESS



Joseph Rainey of South Carolina
First African American to serve in the House
Collection of U.S. House of Representatives

“My race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life.”

—Representative Robert Smalls of South Carolina

The arrival of Senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi and Representative Joseph Rainey of South Carolina on Capitol Hill in 1870, ranks among the great paradoxes in American history; just a decade earlier, their congressional seats were held by southern slave owners. From participation in the federal legislature to their struggle to attain full civil rights, African-American representation in Congress has undergone extensive changes. During the last century, black Members have overcome many barriers to make historic gains in both the House and the Senate.

FAST FACTS

- **First Black American to serve in Congress**
Hiram Revels of Mississippi began his service in the U.S. Senate when he was sworn in on February 25, 1870.

- **First African-American Representative elected to Congress**
Joseph Rainey of South Carolina began his service in the House of Representatives when he was sworn in on December 12, 1870.
- **First African-American Representative to speak on the House Floor**
Jefferson Long of Georgia spoke on the House Floor in 1871.
- **First African-American Representative to preside over a House session**
Joseph Rainey of South Carolina presided over the House in 1874.
- **First African American to chair a congressional committee**
Blanche Bruce of Mississippi became chairman of Senate Select Committee on the Mississippi River in 1877.
- **First African American to chair a standing congressional committee**
William Dawson of Illinois became chairman of the Expenditures in the Executive Departments Committee (later named Government Operations) in 1949.
- **First African American popularly elected to the Senate**
Edward Brooke of Massachusetts was elected to the Senate in 1966.
- **First Black-American woman elected to Congress**
Shirley Chisholm of New York was elected to the House of Representatives in 1968.
- **First Black-American woman elected to the Senate**
Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois was elected to the Senate in 1992.
- **First African-American Member whose child succeeded him in Congress**
Harold Ford, Sr.'s son Harold Ford, Jr. was elected to his father's Memphis, Tennessee, seat upon his retirement in 1996.
- **Most committees chaired by an African-American Member of Congress**
Gus Hawkins of California holds the distinction of the most committees chaired by an African-American Member (four).
- **Longest congressional tenure for a black Member of Congress**
Elected to the House in 1964, John Conyers of Michigan has the longest congressional tenure for a black Member of Congress.
- **State with the most African-American Members of Congress**
Historically, Illinois has had the most African-American Members of Congress.

TEACHING TIP

1. Ask students to locate three Weekly Historical Highlights dates that focus on Black Americans who served in Congress. Use *Black Americans in Congress* to research more

about each of these Members.

- 2.** Begin a class discussion with Representative Gus Hawkin’s quote, *“The leadership belongs not to the loudest, not to those who beat the drums or blow the trumpets, but to those who day in and day out, in all seasons, work for the practical realization of a better world—those who have the stamina to persist and remain dedicated.”* Ask students to think about the meaning of the quote, the possible context, and how the statement may have been related to the experience of the early African-American Members who served in Congress. Have students compile a list of traits they believe a leader should possess and start a class discussion about the different types of leaders.

- 3.** Ask students to choose one former African-American Member of Congress. Have students create a list of biographical and legislative information about this Member, as well as any other distinctive or unique aspects to his/her career. Organize a mock press conference in which each person answers questions about his/her Member and shares important highlights with the rest of the class.