

Hiram Rhodes Revels

Fayetteville, NC · Indiana · Ohio · Illinois · Mississippi

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Hiram Rhodes Revels was born free on September 27, 1827, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, of free African and Croatan descent. Free Black families in the antebellum South lived under tight legal restrictions. He was apprenticed to his older brother Elias, a barber, then left the state as a young man to pursue the education North Carolina denied him. He studied at the Beech Grove Quaker Seminary in Liberty, Indiana, the Darke County Seminary for Black students in Ohio, and Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois.

Work. He was ordained an African Methodist Episcopal minister in 1845, served churches across the Midwest and Upper South, and taught school in states where Black teachers could still be jailed for doing so. During the Civil War, he recruited two Black regiments in Maryland and Missouri and served as a chaplain for the 1st Regiment Mississippi Heavy Artillery, African Descent. He settled in Natchez, Mississippi in 1866. The Mississippi legislature, under Reconstruction, elected him to the U.S. Senate in January 1870.

Impact. He was seated on February 25, 1870, after a Senate debate in which Southern Democrats tried to block him on the argument that no Black man had been a citizen long enough to meet the nine-year citizenship requirement. Republicans pointed out that the Fourteenth Amendment had made him a citizen. The Senate voted 48 to 8 to seat him. He was the first Black person ever to serve in either chamber of the United States Congress. He took the seat previously held by Jefferson Davis, the former president of the Confederacy.

Legacy. He served thirteen months. He left the Senate in March 1871 and became the first president of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College in Mississippi, the institution now called Alcorn State University. He led Alcorn from 1871 to 1873 and again from 1876 to 1882. He pastored and taught until his death on January 16, 1901. Every Black U.S. Senator since, from Blanche Bruce in 1875 through Barack Obama, Cory Booker, Kamala Harris, Raphael Warnock, and Tim Scott, has stood on the precedent he set.

The Network

Phoebe Bass Revels

Wife. Ohio-born teacher, daughter of a free Black family in Zanesville. Married Hiram in 1845 and raised their five daughters while he rode the preaching circuit across the Midwest and the Upper South. Continued to teach at Alcorn during his presidency.

James J. Spelman

Mississippi Republican ally. Black newspaper editor and Mississippi state legislator. Co-founded the Mississippi Republican organization and worked with Revels on voter registration and freedmen's school funding through the early 1870s.

Willis R. Revels

Brother. Also an ordained Methodist minister and physician. Pastored AME churches in Indianapolis and Madison, Indiana. Recruited and counseled Black enlistees for the Union Army alongside Hiram during the Civil War.

Blanche K. Bruce

Successor. The second Black U.S. Senator, elected from Mississippi in 1874 and seated in 1875. Served a full six-year term, the first Black senator to do so, and presided briefly over the Senate, the first Black person to do so.

For Discussion

1. Revels took the Senate seat Jefferson Davis had held for the Confederacy. His first major floor speech got Georgia to reseal its expelled Black legislators within forty-eight hours. What is the strategic value of a symbolic first that produces legislative action inside the same week as the speech, and how often do such compressions recur in American politics?
2. Eighty-six years passed between Blanche Bruce's Senate retirement in 1881 and Edward Brooke's seating in 1967. What conditions produced that near-century gap in Black Senate representation, and what would a comparable gap in another federal office look like were it to open now?
3. Revels founded Alcorn State in 1871 after a Senate career of thirteen months. What is the relationship between a political career that lasts just over a year and an institution that has now operated for more than 150 years, and what does that ratio suggest about the units in which public service is best measured?
4. Revels was born free in North Carolina and had to leave the state to pursue education because state law forbade it for Black residents. A Black teacher in the antebellum South could be jailed for the work. What did it take for Revels to move across the free Black educational infrastructure that existed outside the South, and who built that infrastructure in the first place?
5. Under Reconstruction, Mississippi, a state that had seceded nine years earlier, elected a Black Methodist minister to the United States Senate. What specific conditions of 1869 and 1870 enabled that outcome, and what explains how quickly those conditions were reversed through the Compromise of 1877 and the decades that followed?

Primary Sources

1. Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. Harper & Row, 1988.
<https://ledger.newbws.com/rise/hiram-revels>
2. Thompson, Julius E. *Hiram R. Revels, 1827-1901: A Biography*. Arno Press, 1982.



3. Congressional Globe and Congressional Record, 41st Congress, 2nd Session (1870), Senate proceedings on the seating of Hiram R. Revels and on the readmission of Georgia.
4. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Hiram R. Revels Papers, Jackson, Mississippi.
5. Alcorn State University. Institutional archives and presidential records, 1871-1882.

