

# Hiram R. Revels: America's First Black Senator

Brylynn K. Ellis

Government Resource Specialist

Federal Depository Library Program Coordinator (FDLP)

Cunningham Memorial Library

Indiana State University

[Brylynn.Ellis@indstate.edu](mailto:Brylynn.Ellis@indstate.edu)



Photo from the  
Library of Congress

# Basics

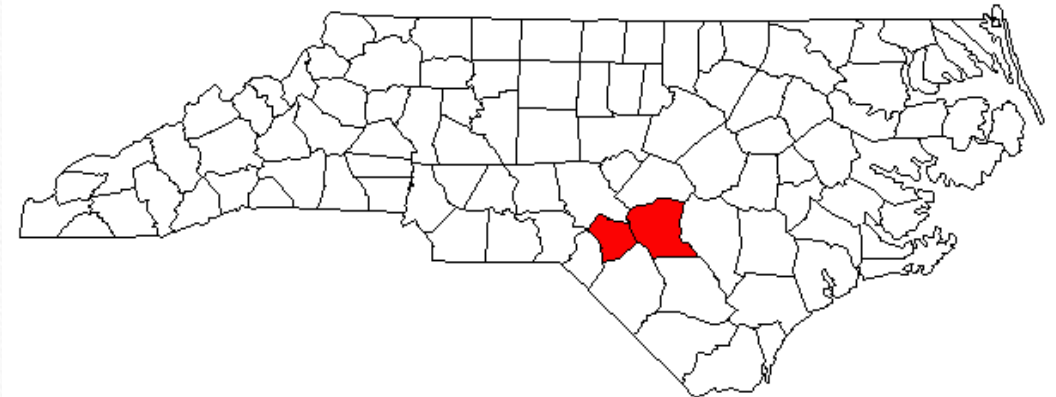
- Born: September 27<sup>th</sup>, 1827
- Party: Republican
- Position: Senator
- State/Territory: Mississippi
- Died: January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1901
- Buried: Hillcrest Cemetery in Holly Springs, Mississippi



# Setting the Stage

---

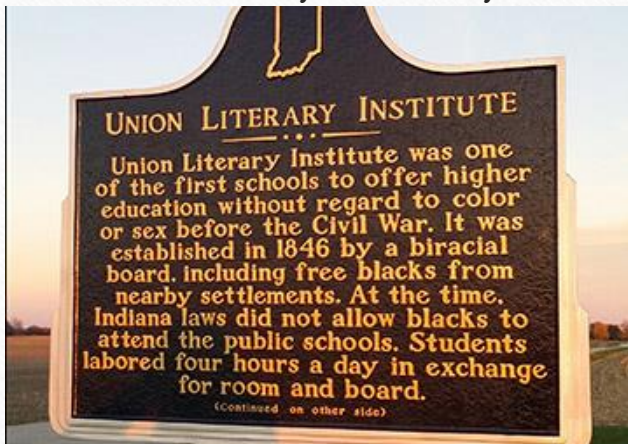
- 1827: North Carolina is a slave state.
- Revels' parents were free people of color and therefore he was born a free man.
  - Both of his parents had African, European and Native American ancestry.
  - His mother was of Scottish descent.
  - His father was a Baptist preacher.



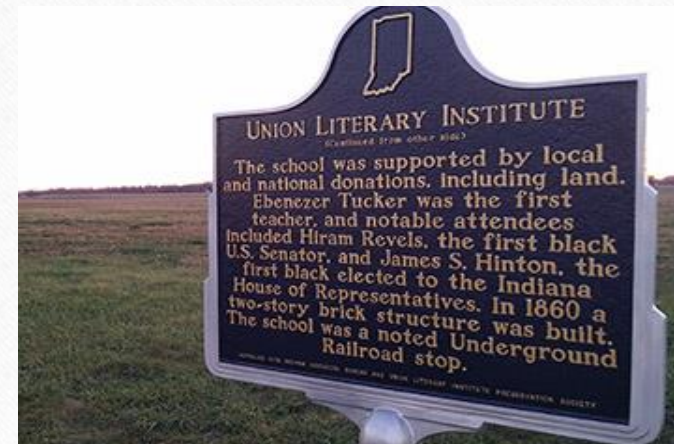


# Early Life and Education

- Attended school taught by a free Black woman.
- 1838: Moved to Lincolnton, NC. Lived with his brother, Elias, and apprenticed as a barber in his brother's shop.
- 1844: Attended Beech Grove Quaker Seminary in Liberty, IN located in Union County. Also attended the Darke County Seminary for black students in Ohio.



Images from the Indiana Historical Bureau



# Religious Career



- 1845: Ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.
- First Pastorate was most likely in Indiana.
- Was a preacher and religious teacher in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, Missouri and Kansas.
- Would marry Phoebe A. Bass in early 1850's.
- Was imprisoned in Missouri for preaching to Blacks in 1854.
- After his release he took a position in Baltimore, Maryland in 1855.
- Studied religion at Knox College in Galesburg, IL from 1856-1857.

# Civil War (1861-1865)

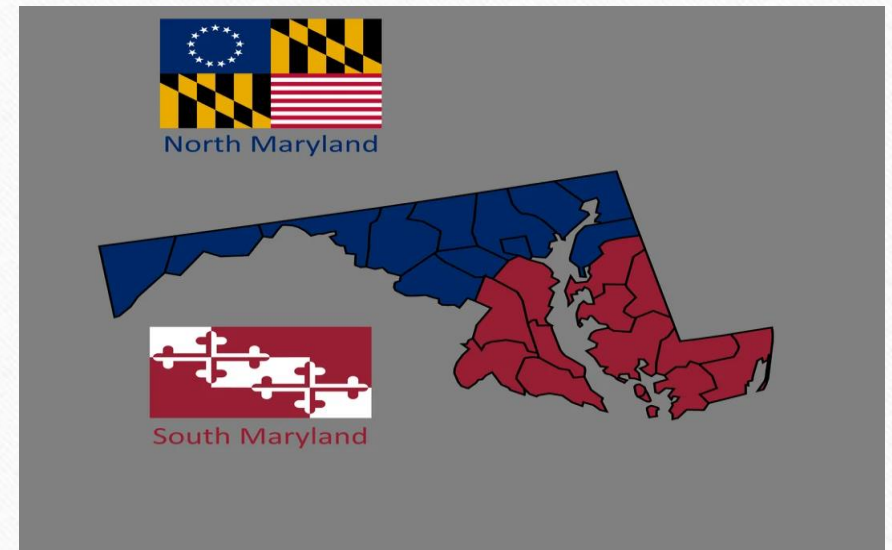
Maryland was a slave state but not a confederate state.

1861: Revels was actively recruited enough Black men to form two Black regiments.

1862: Blacks are able to enlist and Revels becomes a chaplain for a Black regiment and goes to campaigns in Mississippi.

1863: Established freedman's schools in Missouri.

After the war he would serve in churches in Louisville and New Orleans.



# Getting into Politics

---

- 1866: Settles in Natchez, Mississippi as an elder of the AME Church.
- 1868: Won his first political position as Alderman for the city of Natchez.
- 1869: Won election to the state senate, one of 35 Black Americans elected to the state legislature that year.

# Mississippi Re-Enters the Union



- 1861: Democrats Albert Brown and Jefferson Davis vacated their state's Senate seats when the state seceded from the Union to join the Confederate States of America.
- One seat would expire in 1871 and the other in 1875.
- Legislatures agreed to fill the 1871 seat by a Black Senator and the 1875 seat by a White Senator.
- Black legislators agreed to the deal. This was endorsed by both Republican and Democratic parties.
- A vote of 85 to 15 voted for Revels to fill Brown's seat.



## Struggles to Reach the Senate



- January 1870: Senator Revels arrives to Washington D.C. Could not present his credentials until Mississippi was readmitted to the United States, which happened February 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Republicans wanted to swear Senator Revels in immediately but Democrats were determined to block their efforts.
- Democrats claimed his election was null and void.
  - Mississippi was under military rule and couldn't confirm his election.
  - 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.
  - The 1857 *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision.
- The Senate voted 48 to 8 to seat Senator Revels.
- Senator Revels was sworn in February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1870.

# In the Congressional Record

---

So the motion of Mr. WILSON was agreed to.  
The VICE PRESIDENT. The Senator-elect will present himself at the chair of the Vice President to take the oaths of office.  
Mr. REVELS was escorted to the desk by Mr. WILSON, and the oaths prescribed by law having been administered to him, Mr. REVELS took his seat in the Senate.

Image from the Library of Congress

## In the Senate



Image from the Library of Congress.

- Assigned the Committee on Education and Labor and the Committee on the District of Columbia.
- Was a champion for Black Americans and education.
- Spoke out against racial segregation.
- Fought efforts to undermine the civil and political rights of Black Americans.
- His term would come to an end on March 3, 1871.

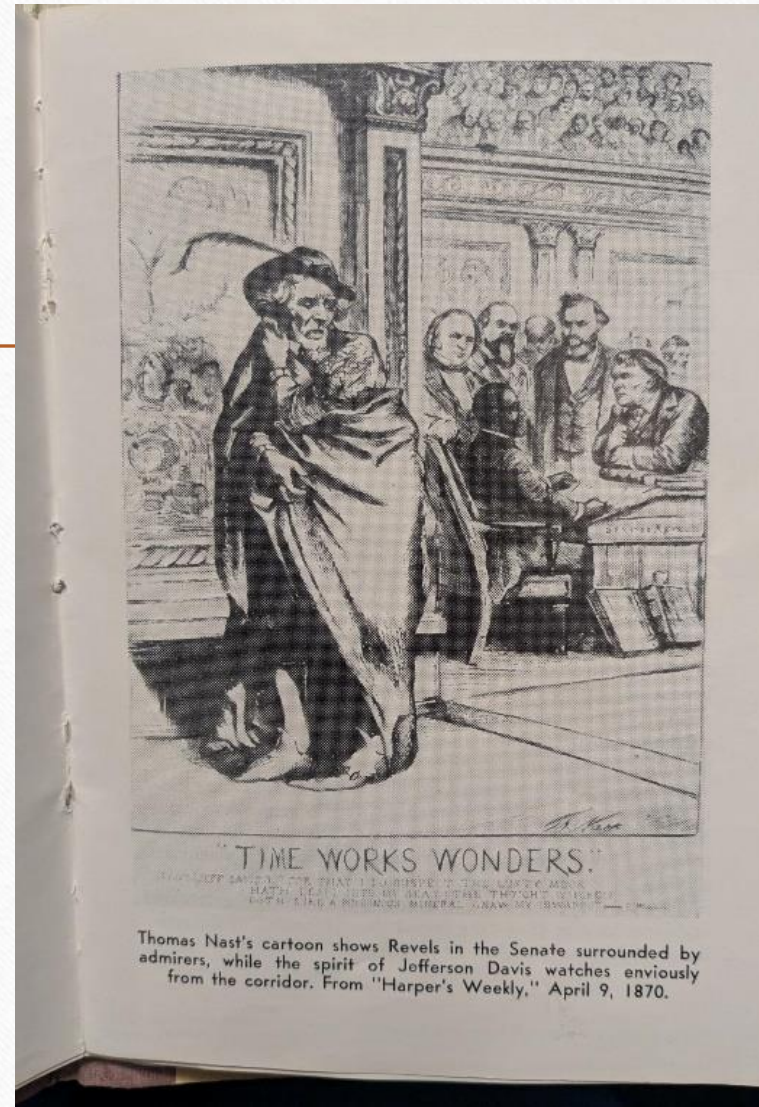


Ex-Senator Blanche Bruce, Frederick Douglass, Ex-Senator Hiram Revels. "Heroes of the Colored Race". Above them are Presidents Abraham Lincoln, James A. Garfield and Ulysses S. Grant.

Image from the Library of Congress

# Political Cartoon

---



## Post-Senate



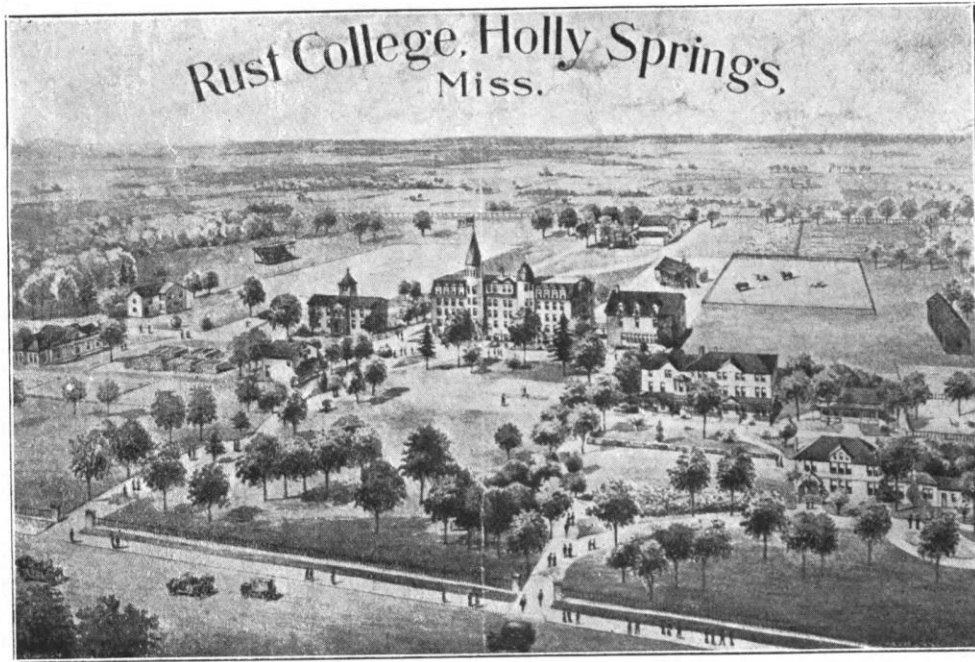
- After his short term in the U.S. Senate, Revels would return to Mississippi to be the first president of Alcorn University.
- First land-grant school for Black students.
- Served as Mississippi's interim Secretary of State in 1873.
- Resigned from his position at Alcorn to go back to the ministry.
  - Went back 1876.

# Political Alliances



- Started to grow critical of corruption in the Republican Party.
  - Most likely referring to the Whiskey Ring Scandal.
- Due to the corruption accruing in the Republican Party, Revels supported the Democratic Party in the 1875 state campaigns.
  - Not his best move.
  - The 1<sup>st</sup> Mississippi Plan: A plan that used intimidation and violence against Black voters to dissuade them from voting. The Democratic Party would take control back of the state legislature.

1882-1901



- Retired from Alcorn University in 1882.
- Returned to Holly Springs where he was active in the religious community and taught theology at Rust College.
- Became the district superintendent for the A.M.E.
- While at a religious conference in Aberdeen, Mississippi, he would suffer a paralytic stroke and would not survive on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1901.
- Buried: Hillcrest Cemetery in Holly Springs, Mississippi





Image from Find A Grave.



Image from Find A Grave.

# Sources

- A Gentleman from Mississippi: Our First Negro Congressman, Hiram R. Revels 1960
  - LOC E664.R4 L3
- History, Art, and Archives: Revels, Hiram Rhodes  
[https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/REVELS,-Hiram-Rhodes-\(R000166\)/](https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/REVELS,-Hiram-Rhodes-(R000166)/)
- Library of Congress: Heroes of the Colored Race <https://www.loc.gov/item/00651114/>
- National Park Service: Hiram Rhodes Revels <https://www.nps.gov/people/hiram-rhodes-revels.htm>
- Senate Stories: Hiram Revels: First African American Senator  
<https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/senate-stories/First-African-American-Senator.htm>