

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

African Americans in Congress

New book explores black political clout

The Democratic recapture of Congress and the record number of African Americans there – including the chairs of the Ways and Means, Judiciary and Homeland Security committees – signals a resurgence of black political clout on Capitol Hill this year.

But for most of the nation's history, that level of influence was sadly absent, as a new book, African Americans in Congress: A Documentary History illustrates.

In 1869, Louisiana newspaper editor J. Willis Menard became the first African American to claim a House seat in a special election marred by intimidation and harassment of black voters.

In arguing his case, Menard became the first African American to speak on the House floor, where he said, "I do not expect nor do I ask that there shall be any favor shown me on account of my race or the former condition of that race." But the House rejected his claim.

The following year, it took three days of debate before the Senate agreed to swear in the first black senator, Republican Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who ironically filled the seat of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Democrats couched their opposition largely in irrelevant constitutional terms, but their words demonstrated that racism was the implicit, and sometimes explicit, basis for opposition.

After Revels delivered his maiden speech, a pro-Democratic New York newspaper labeled it "the first speech ever delivered by the lineal descendant of an orang-outang in Congress."

And when he traveled between Washington and home, he was forced to ride in the segregated section of Mississippi River steamboats.

During Reconstruction, the South sent a string of African Americans to Congress, but they wielded little influence, individually or collectively. There were never enough at any one time to constitute an effective voting bloc, and none stayed long enough to accumulate meaningful seniority.

In 1880, Blanche Bruce of Mississippi, the second black senator,



Hiram Revels of Mississippi was the first black to serve in the U.S. Senate.

did chair the Senate select committee investigating the collapse of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Co., but he served only a single term, and no other African American would chair a standing committee until 1949.

Bleak years followed Reconstruction, with disenfranchisement of black voters across the South, violence and fraud directed at those who dared try to vote and gerrymandering that destroyed black-majority districts.

On Jan. 29, 1901, the sole remaining African American in Congress, Rep. George White of North Carolina, delivered his valedictory speech.

"I want to enter a plea for the colored man, the colored woman, the colored boy and the colored girl," White said. "This is perhaps the Negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress, but let me say, phoenix-like, he will rise up some day and come again."

Yet it would take almost three more decades before an African American would serve. That would be Oscar DePriest, an Illinois Republican.

When President Herbert

Hoover's wife invited DePriest's wife to a White House tea for congressional spouses, a national firestorm ignited. The Texas legislature even passed a resolution rebuking the First Lady and declaring that "we bow our heads in shame and regret."

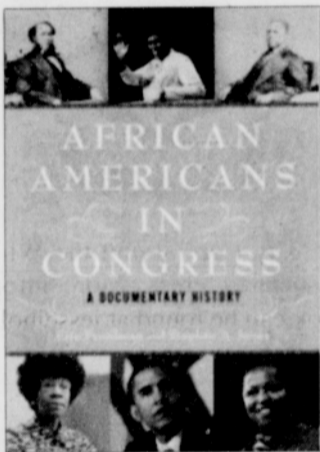
In 1934, DePriest challenged segregation of the Capitol restaurant, declaring, "If we allow segregation and the denial of constitutional rights under the dome of the Capitol, where in God's name will we get them?"

His plea fell on deaf ears. The restaurant remained off-limits to blacks until at least 1948.

It was the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a series of Supreme Court rulings and the civil rights movement that propelled major transformation in the complexion of Congress.

Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr., D-N.Y., chaired the Education and Labor Committee, shepherding key legislation for Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, until his ethical breaches cost him that post.

In 1966, for the first time since Reconstruction, a black candidate won a Senate seat. He was Edward Brooke, a moderate Republican from Massachusetts. In 1971, the Congressional Black Caucus was officially born as a nonpartisan organization.



Save Your History, Museum Urges

continued ▲ from A7

also at risk," he said.

"It's the kind of thing that earlier generations treasured, but as families move around, I thought we better do this, not in terms of what we collect, but what we can pre-

serve," Bunch said.

Bunch said some items examined during the "African American Treasures" events might eventually get into the museum's collection. But he also wants people with historical items — if no one in the family is interested in caring for

them — to consider donating them to local libraries, museums and institutions where they could become part of a research collection.

"This is a process that is really about helping people to remember, trying to get people to realize that their story is history," Bunch said.

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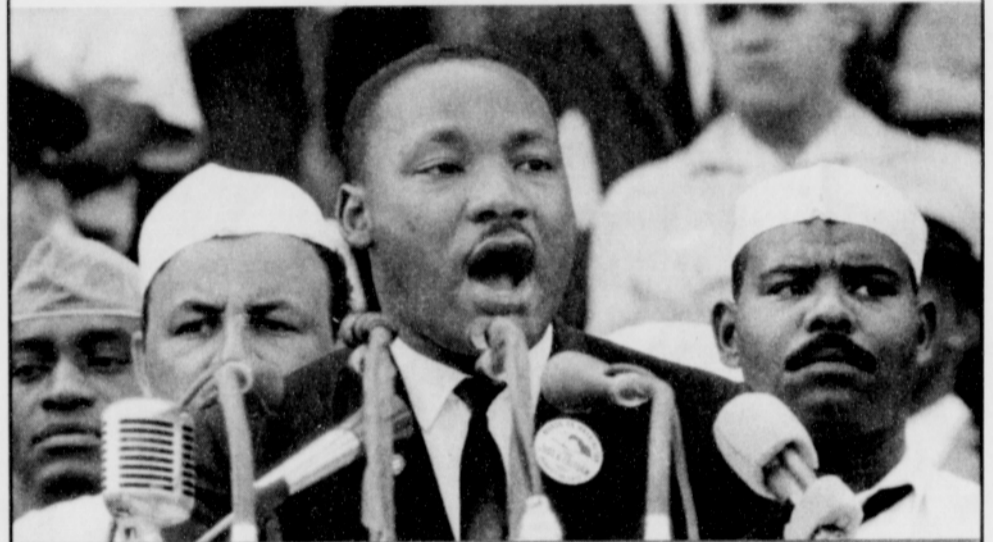
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