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Before Scott Colom: The History of Statewide Black Elected Officials in Mississippi

From Reconstruction to the Present: Mississippi's Long Struggle to Restore Statewide Black Political Representation



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The potential election of Scott Colom is sending shockwaves through the system, as it seems inconceivable that Mississippi would elect a Black man statewide. People, including the Democratic Party, didn't think Colom could win a U.S. Senate seat. Although Colom received some national support, the DSCC excluded Mississippi from its $40 million investment in 10 battleground states. Yet with a few thousand votes and thousands of affidavit ballots requiring validation. Colom leads the race by just over a thousand votes at the time of this writing. We may get a clearer look at how voter suppression works as we learn more about affidavit ballots and how they work.

There was a time it wouldn't have been unusual for Mississippi to have a Black Senator. They have had two. Hiram Revels was Mississippi's first Black Senator, though there is an asterisk. When Mississippi was readmitted to the Union in 1870 after the Civil War, two Senate seats were open, and both had time left on their terms. Those seats had been held by Albert G Brown and Jefferson Davis, who withdrew from the Senate when Mississippi seceeded.

When Mississippi was readmitted to congressional representation in February 1870, its newly elected Republican-controlled legislature had to fill both vacancies.

The legislature made a political decision:

- Revels, a Black Republican, would receive the seat formerly occupied by Albert G. Brown, whose term expired March 3, 1871.
- White Republican Adelbert Ames would receive the seat formerly occupied by Jefferson Davis, whose term expired in 1875.

One might ask why the white Republican got the longer term. That was all the legislature would agree to. They considered themselves generous to allow a Black Senator at all. Revels became the first Black man in American history to serve in the United States Senate. His seat was scheduled to expire on March 3, 1871. Mississippi's legislature had already selected another Republican, James Lusk Alcorn, to take the Senate seat beginning in March 1871. Alcorn was a white former Confederate general who had become a Republican during Reconstruction. Revels accepted the expiration of his term and returned to Mississippi, where he became the first president of Alcorn University (now Alcorn State University).

The second Black U.S. senator from Mississippi was Blanche Kelso Bruce. He became the first Black Senator to serve a full six-year term. Bruce and Revels were the only two Black Americans elected to the Senate during Reconstruction, and both represented Mississippi. Bruce was born enslaved but rose to become one of the most prominent political figures in Mississippi during Reconstruction.

Blanche K. Bruce remained influential after leaving the Senate in 1881. He did not return to obscurity. He continued working in Republican politics and held several important federal appointments, becoming one of the most prominent Black Americans in Washington during the late nineteenth century.

President James A. Garfield appointed Bruce as the Register of the U.S. Treasury (1881–1885). Bruce became the first African American whose signature appeared on American paper currency. He retained the position under President Chester A. Arthur and left when Democrat Grover Cleveland took office in 1885. He remained active in Republican politics.

Bruce continued to participate in national Republican conventions. At the 1880 convention, he received eight votes for the vice-presidential

nomination. In 1888, he received 11 votes. He was also considered for a Cabinet position but never received one. Bruce later served as Register of the U.S. Treasury (1881–1885) and served on the boards of Washington's public schools and Howard University. Howard awarded him an honorary law degree. He returned to the Treasury Department in 1897. President William McKinley again appointed him Register of the Treasury. However, his health was deteriorating.

Bruce died in Washington, D.C., on March 17, 1898, at age 57, following a prolonged illness involving kidney complications associated with diabetes. Approximately 3,000 people attended his funeral at Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Mississippi had seven Black men who held major statewide offices during Reconstruction, but not all seven were elected directly by voters. They were:

- James D. Lynch: Secretary of State, 1869–1872
- Hiram R. Revels: Secretary of State, 1872–1873
- Hannibal C. Carter: Secretary of State, 1873–1874
- M. M. McLeod: Secretary of State, 1873
- James Hill: Secretary of State, 1874–1878
- Alexander K. Davis: Lieutenant Governor, 1874–1876
- Thomas W. Cardozo: Superintendent of Public Education

History books suggest that Reconstruction was a smooth process where political gains for the newly freed came easily. That was hardly the case:

1. The first targets: Black voters and Republican organizers, 1867–1872

After the Civil War, Mississippi's Black population represented approximately 55 percent of the state's residents. Once Black men gained voting rights, they became a powerful constituency for the Republican Party.

In the 1869 elections, Black Mississippians helped elect a Republican government. The first Black legislators took their seats in January 1870: five in the state Senate and 35 in the House. James D. Lynch had already been elected secretary of state, and Hiram Revels soon became the first Black U.S. senator.

White resistance increasingly took organized and violent forms. The Ku Klux Klan, established in 1866, became active in Mississippi, attacking Black Republican organizers, teachers, ministers, and people who encouraged formerly enslaved people to exercise their political rights. Terror was intended to discourage the entire Black community from participating in public life. Black churches, schools, and Republican political organizations became targets.

2. The Meridian violence of 1871

One particularly horrifying episode occurred in Meridian in March 1871.

Three Black political leaders were arrested after being accused of making inflammatory speeches. During their trial, armed white men associated with the Ku Klux Klan attacked the courtroom, killing the Republican judge and two of the defendants, along with Black people in attendance.

The violence spread beyond the courthouse. White rioters subsequently hunted down and murdered Black community leaders. The episode became one of the most notorious examples of Reconstruction-era political violence in Mississippi. Political leadership carried a deadly price.

3. Vicksburg: The effort to remove Black elected officials, 1874

By 1873, Black Mississippians were holding increasingly important positions in local government. One was Peter Crosby, elected Warren County's first Black sheriff. Crosby's election mattered because the sheriff controlled law enforcement and held considerable local political authority.

White Democrats and members of the Taxpayers' League wanted him removed. On December 2, 1874, armed white men demanded his resignation. Crosby refused and appealed to Republican Governor Adelbert Ames for assistance.

On December 7, Black citizens marched toward Vicksburg to support their elected sheriff. Armed white groups intercepted them, and violence erupted. The National Park Service estimates that approximately 23 African Americans were killed in Warren County during the violence that followed. Black residents hid in the woods to escape the attacks. Federal troops eventually arrived, and Crosby was restored to office. This was an effort to force a duly elected Black official out of office through armed intimidation.

4. The Mississippi Plan and the Clinton Massacre, 1875

By 1875, white Democrats had developed a coordinated political strategy to regain control of Mississippi. Historians call it the Mississippi Plan.

It involved armed political organizations, intimidation, threats, economic retaliation, voter suppression, and election fraud. One of its most notorious episodes occurred in Clinton on September 4, 1875.

Republicans had organized a political gathering at Moss Hill, attended by an estimated 1,500 to 2,500 people, most of them Black Mississippians and their families. Among the participants was Charles Caldwell, a Black state senator and prominent Republican leader.

White paramilitary members known as White Liners confronted the gathering. Shooting erupted, initially killing at least five Black people and three white people.

The violence did not end that afternoon. Hundreds of White Liners arrived in Clinton, and attacks spread into the surrounding countryside. Black residents were hunted, shot, and killed. Historian Melissa Janczewski Jones, writing in the Mississippi Encyclopedia, places the African American death toll between 35 and 50.

The massacre was particularly significant because it took place just two months before the statewide election. Governor Ames appealed to President Ulysses S. Grant for federal assistance. Grant ultimately declined to intervene, leaving the governor without the federal military support he sought.

5. The assassination of Black elected officials

On October 20, 1875, James G. Patterson, a Black state representative and teacher from Yazoo County, was attacked and hanged by a white mob. He was accused of hiring someone to commit murder, an accusation described by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History as almost certainly false.

Patterson's final actions are particularly heartbreaking. Before he died, he took money from his pocket and asked the leader of the mob to send it to his sisters in Ohio. He had been helping pay for their education.

Then came the murder of Charles Caldwell. Caldwell had become one of the most influential Black political figures in Mississippi. Formerly enslaved, he had participated in the 1868 constitutional convention and subsequently served as a state senator.

He resisted efforts to intimidate Black voters and became a prominent voice for Republican political organization. On December 30, 1875, white political opponents lured him into the cellar of a store in Clinton. He was shot through a window and left dying in the street.

According to the account preserved by the Mississippi Encyclopedia, Caldwell told his attackers:

> *"Remember when you kill me that you kill a gentlemen and a brave man. Never say you killed a coward." — Charles Caldwell*

His assassination eliminated one of the state's most prominent Black political leaders.

6. The election that ended Reconstruction

On November 2, 1875, Mississippi held legislative elections that would determine whether Republicans could retain control of the state.

The Democrats won overwhelmingly, taking 95 of the 115 House seats and 27 of the 37 Senate seats. They gained control of the legislature and subsequently used that power to remove Republican officeholders, including Black Lieutenant Governor Alexander K. Davis and Superintendent of Education Thomas W. Cardozo.

Violence, intimidation, and allegations of extensive fraud marked the election. A congressional investigation in 1876 collected testimony from 162 witnesses and produced a report exceeding 2,000 pages.

7. What happened to Black political power afterward?

Mississippi's Black political leadership was dismantled. White Democrats regained control of the legislature, the judiciary, and eventually the

governorship. Black citizens faced increasing restrictions on voting and political participation.

The state's 1890 constitution subsequently established poll taxes, literacy tests, and other mechanisms that effectively disenfranchised most Black voters. The remarkable political progress of Reconstruction was followed by decades in which Black Mississippians were largely excluded from meaningful political power.

The larger historical significance

There is a central point that deserves emphasis in any account of Mississippi Reconstruction:

Black Mississippians did not simply lose political power because white voters changed their minds. Political violence, intimidation, assassinations, and electoral manipulation were used to undermine the political system that had allowed formerly enslaved people to become voters and elected officials.

The last Black Mississippian to hold a statewide elected office before Scott Colom was James Hill, who served as Mississippi's secretary of state until January 1878. Mississippi has gone 148 years without a Black statewide elected official, from Hill's departure in 1878 through the 2026 election. And now the votes are being counted to see if that changes. The record should reflect that no Black woman has won a statewide election in the state. Mississippi might want to take a peek at nearby Georgia, where after the recent midterms, eight Black women will fill statewide offices, including Georgia's first Black Governor, Keisha Lance Bottoms.

Should Scott Colom be elected Senator, it will end a 148-year drought in Mississippi. I think that's long enough.

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