



African Americans in Government

The Antebellum Era

“...it is the first duty of every American citizen, whose conscience permits so to do, to use his political as well as his moral power.”

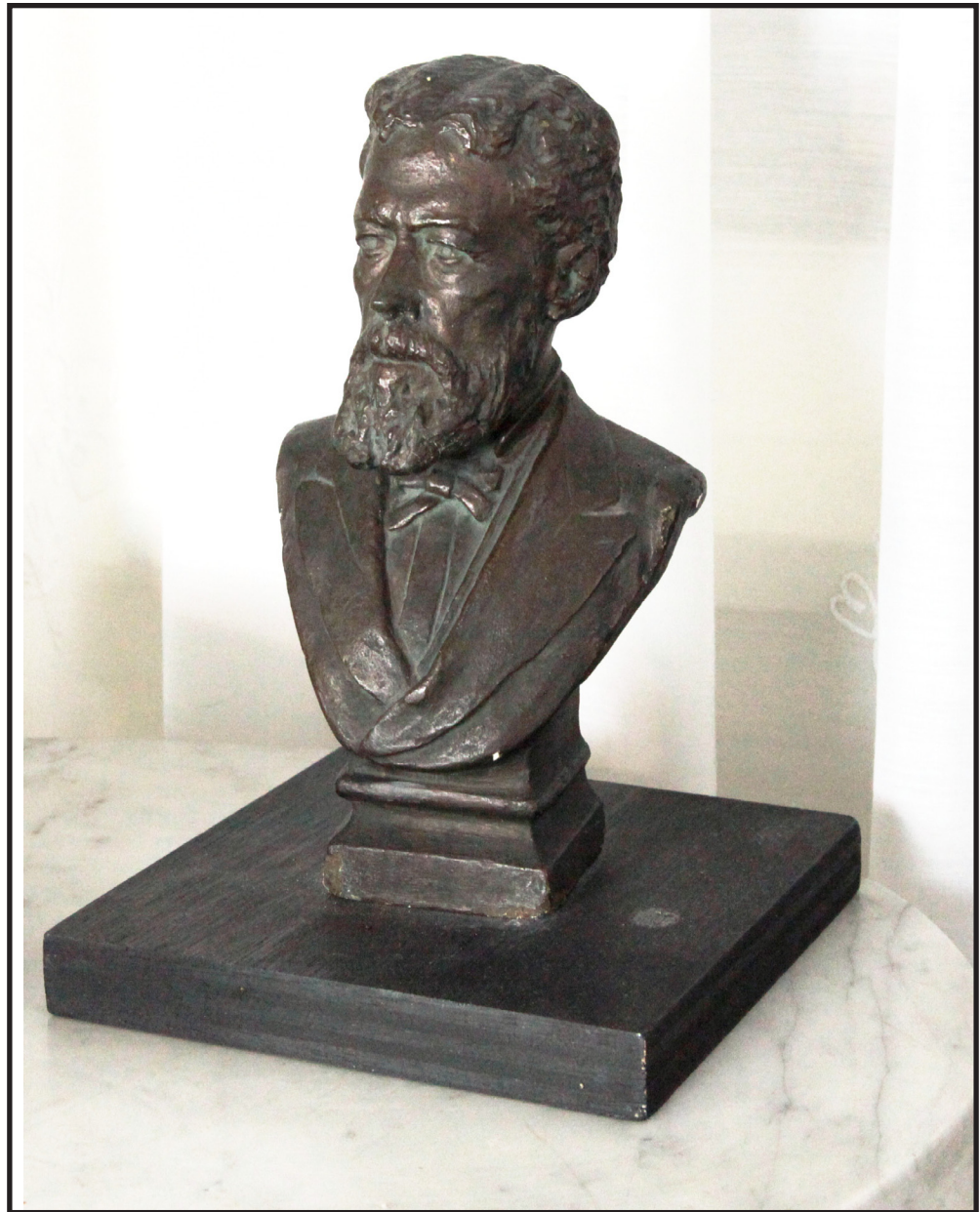
-Frederick Douglass, 1848

The history of African American elected and appointed officials is tied to African American voting rights. For much of this country’s history, African Americans were barred from voting or holding political office.



In the Cotton Field

Favorable conditions for lucrative crops such as cotton encouraged the growth of slavery in the South. Slavery ended in the North during the beginning of the 19th century, but prejudice against African Americans continued. Free African Americans were denied political rights and suffered harsh discrimination. (Library of Congress, LOT 5174)



Many state constitutions written during the Revolutionary era did not prohibit free African Americans from voting, but laws were enacted to restrict African American voting rights.

Between 1810 and 1838, free African Americans lost the right to vote in Maryland, Tennessee, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and New York.

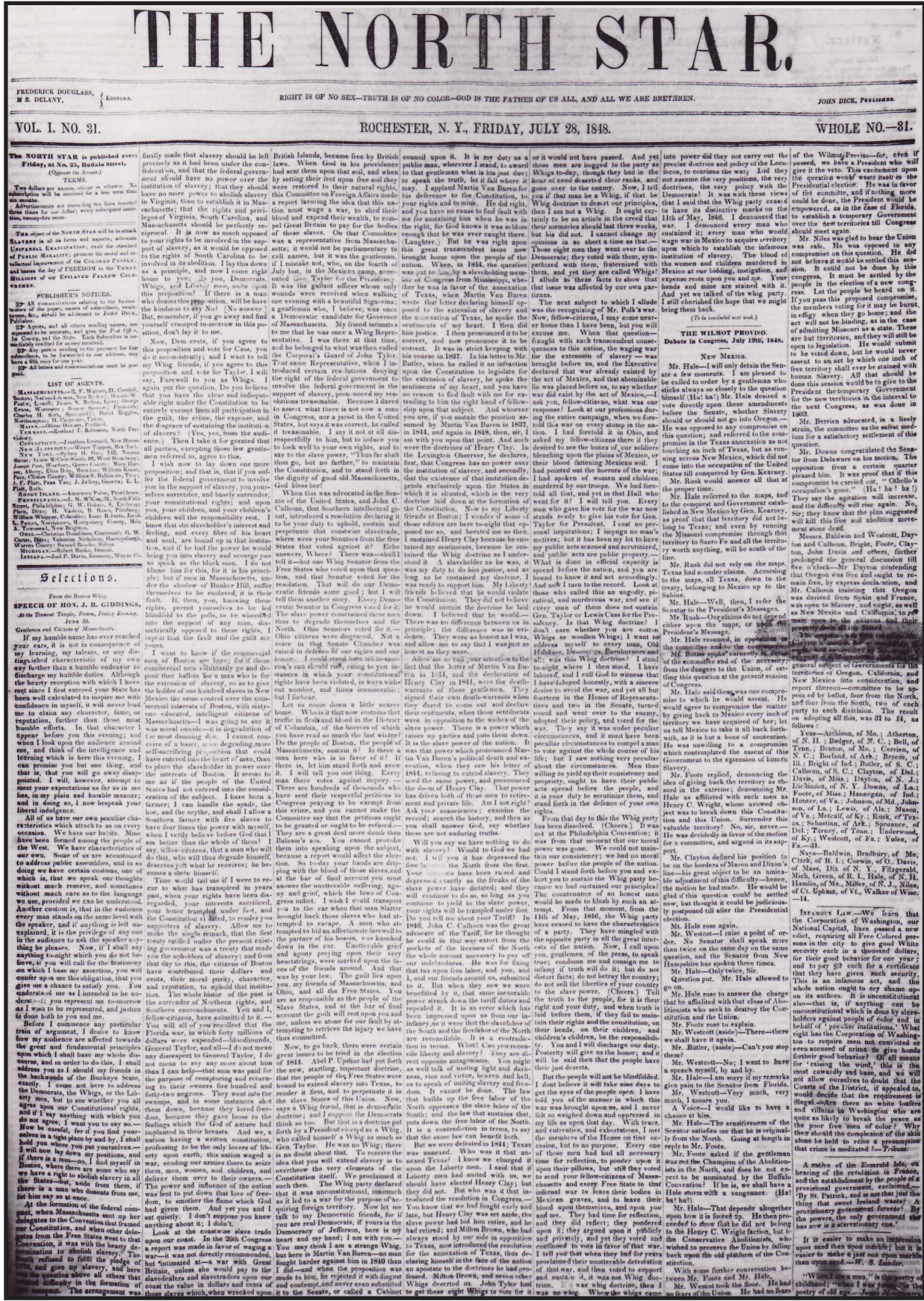
African Americans were largely unable to vote until after the Civil War when the Constitution was amended to ensure their voting rights.

John Mercer Langston

John Mercer Langston was probably the first African American to be elected to political office when he won the race for the clerkship of Brownhelm, OH in 1855. He went on to become the U.S. Minister to Haiti and a U.S. representative from Virginia. (National Park Service, Frederick Douglass NHS)

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. The anti-slavery novel became the best-selling book of the nineteenth century behind the Bible. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* helped popularize abolitionism and anti-Southern sentiment in the North to such an extent that President Lincoln is quoted as saying to Stowe at the start of the Civil War, “So this is the little lady who made this big war.” (Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-11212)



The North Star

Frederick Douglass published his newspaper “The North Star” in Rochester, NY, advocating the abolition of slavery and equal rights for African Americans. (National Park Service, Frederick Douglass NHS)



African Americans in Government

The Civil War Amendments

“We are fighting for unity; . . . in which there shall be no North, no South, no East, no West, no black, no white, but a solidarity of the nation. . . .”
-Frederick Douglass, 1864

Legislation passed after the end of the Civil War provided the first Constitutional protection of African American voting rights.

The 13th Amendment,
ratified on December 6th, 1865
abolished slavery.

“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States . . .”

The 14th Amendment,
ratified in 1868, secured African
American citizenship.

“All persons born or naturalized
in the United States . . . are citizens
of the United States . . .”

The 15th Amendment,
ratified in 1870, outlawed any
race-based voting qualifications.

“The right of citizens of the
United States to vote shall not
be denied or abridged . . . on
account of race, color, or previous
condition of servitude.”



Mustered Out

Published in Harper's Weekly, May 19, 1866.

U.S. Colored Troops return to Little Rock, Arkansas, at the end of the Civil War.

By the end of the Civil War, African American soldiers made up almost ten percent of the Union Army. They argued that if they would fight and die for their country, they deserved to exercise their full rights as citizens.

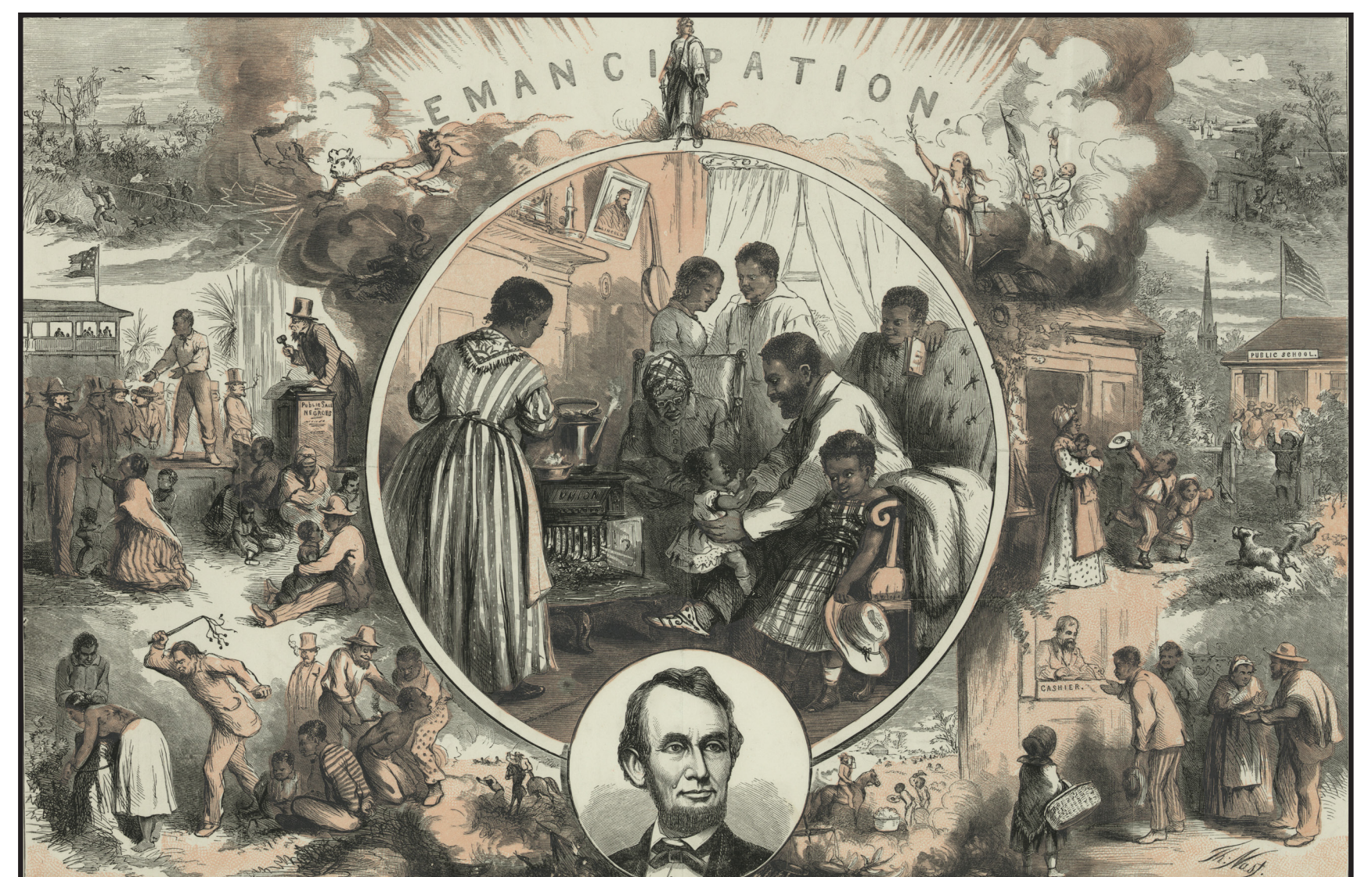
By Alfred R. Waud

(Library of Congress, DRWG/US - Waud, no. 162)

Emancipation

An engraving by the illustrator Thomas Nast commemorating Emancipation.

(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-03898)





African Americans in Government

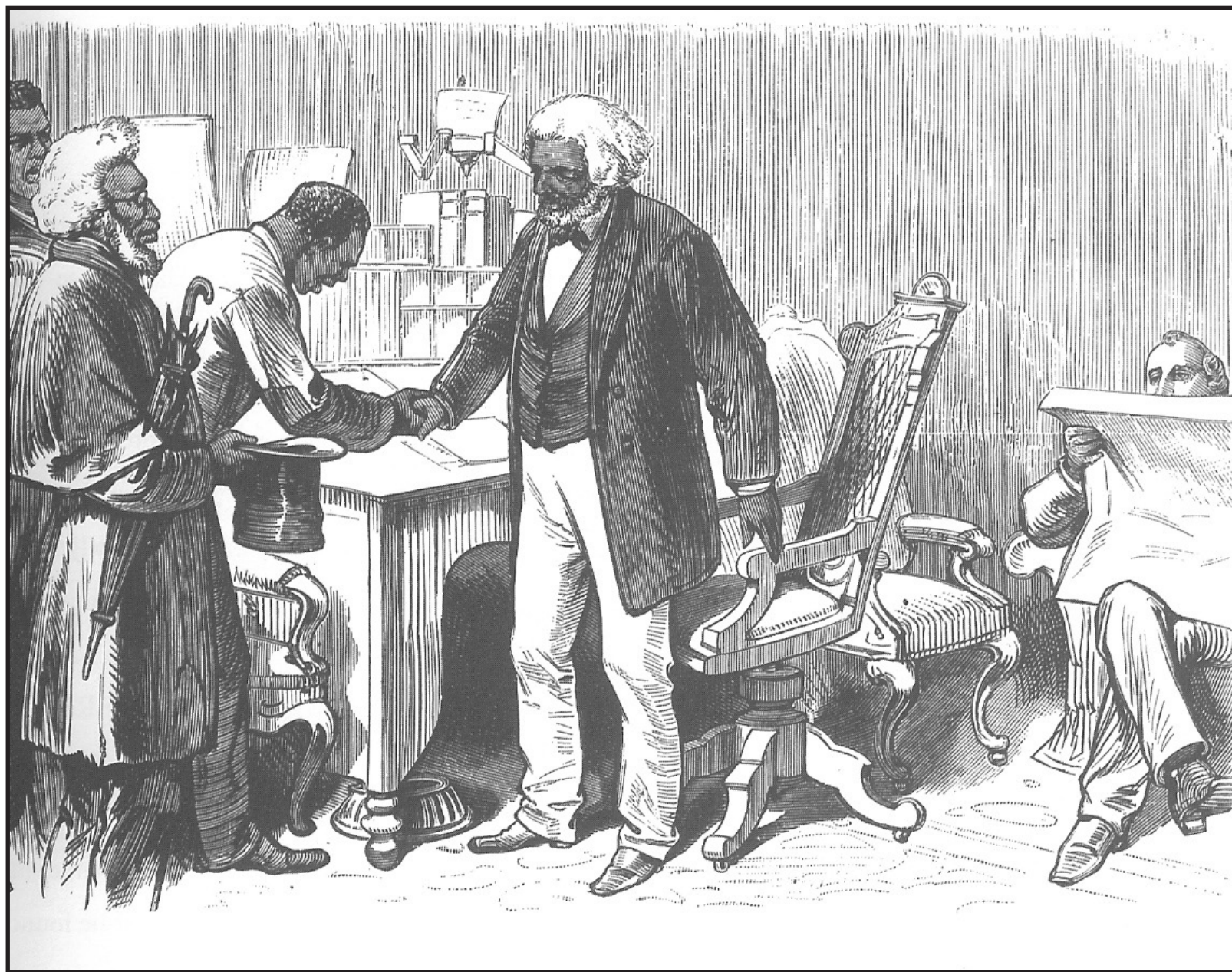
Frederick Douglass' Postions

"I...hope that you will retain Mr. Douglass in his present office of Marshall of Washington...because I so honor this man's high and blemishless character and so admire his brave and long crusade for the liberties and and elevation of his race."

-Mark Twain to President Garfield, 1881

During the Reconstruction Era, U.S. Presidents appointed African Americans to represent the United States in nations such as Haiti and Liberia and to federal bureaucratic positions. These were not politically powerful positions, but they held great symbolism for African-

Americans, because for the first time blacks held visible posts in the government.



Receiving Visitors

Frederick Douglass was recognized as the leader and spokesman for the African American community during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Politicians and oridanry citizens sought his advice and opinions.

(National Park Service, Frederick Douglass NHS)

As the most prominent African American in the country, Frederick Douglass was appointed to several such positions. He was appointed the first African American

Leading the Parade

Frederick Douglass marching in the inaugural parade of president Garfield as U.S. Marshall.

(National Park Service, Frederick Douglass NHS)



US Marshall in 1877, a ceremonial position he held with pride. In 1881, however he was removed from the post and made the District of Columbia's Recorder of Deeds. This was essentially a high-level clerkship, but he accepted the position because he felt it was important to remain visibly active in some level of government. Frederick Douglass also served as Minister to Haiti from 1889 to 1891.



Reading in Haiti

Frederick Douglass at his desk while serving as the U.S. Minister to Haiti.

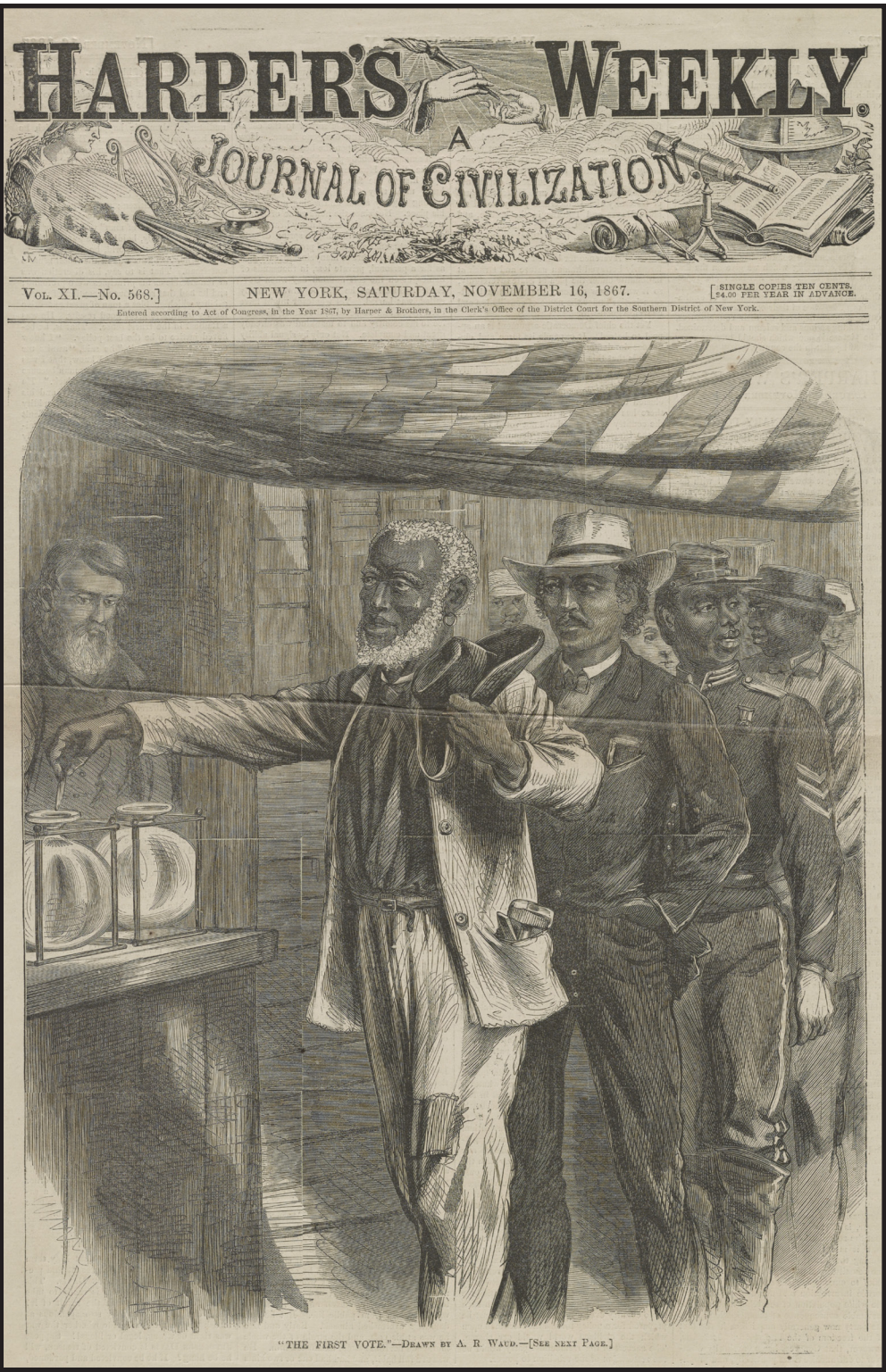
(National Park Service, Frederick Douglass NHS)



African Americans in Government Reconstruction

“No man can be truly free...who has himself no means in his own hands for guarding, protecting, defending, and maintaining that liberty.”
-Frederick Douglass, 1881

The period after the Civil War from 1865 to 1877 was known as Reconstruction. During Reconstruction, Congress required the Southern states to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States by creating new state constitutions and ratifying the 14th Amendment.



The First Vote
An illustration from Harper’s Weekly shows African Americans casting their first votes. Thomas M. Peterson of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, was the first African American voter under the 15th Amendment. He voted in a special election to revise his city’s charter.
(Library of Congress, LOT 14013, no. 48)

The Reconstruction Era marked the beginning of major African American involvement in the federal government. All of the Southern state constitutional conventions contained African American members. These conventions drew up the most progressive constitutions the South had ever known. Many abolished property qualifications for voting or provided for public education systems.



The Result of the Fifteenth Amendment
An illustration commemorating the myriad ways that passage of the 15th Amendment affected African American life in the United States.
(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-02178)



Heroes of the Colored Race
An illustration showing Frederick Douglass flanked by the first two African American senators, Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce.
(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-01619)

Between 1869 and 1901 there were two African American senators and twenty black congressmen. Their advocacy was not confined to the African American community. They fought discrimination towards African Americans, Native Americans, and Chinese immigrants.



African Americans in Government

Reconstruction Office Holders

“...no republic is safe that tolerates a privileged class, or denies to any of its citizens equal rights and equal means to maintain them...” -Frederick Douglass, 1866

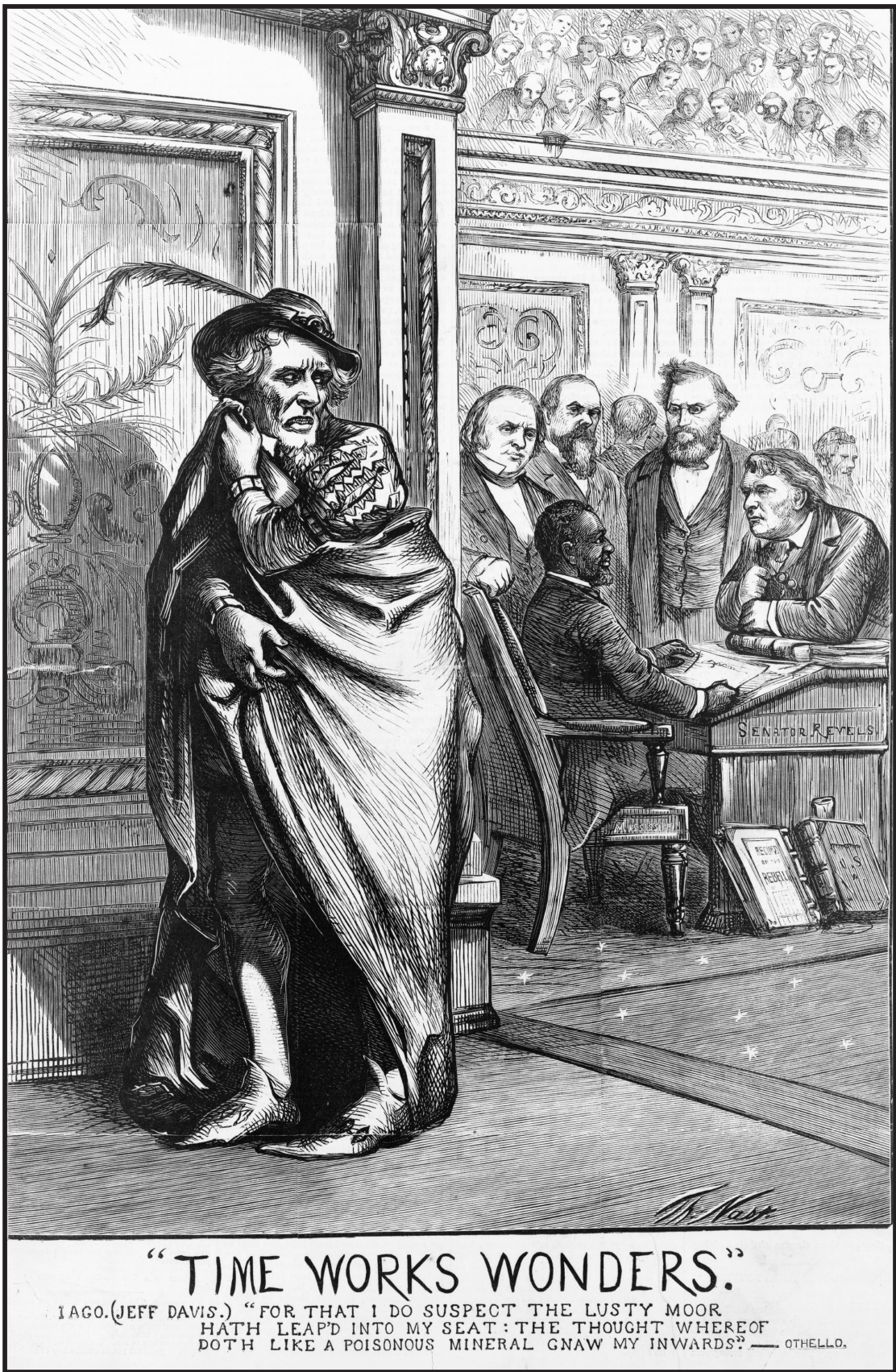
Joseph H. Rainey was the first African American to serve in the House of Representatives. He was elected to fill a South Carolina vacancy in the House in July of 1870. He fought for legislation against the Ku Klux Klan, and was regularly returned to his seat until 1878, when the resurgence of white political power in the South ended his political career.



Joseph H. Rainey
(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-cwpbh-00664)

Hiram Rhoades Revels was the first African American U.S. senator. A minister who helped to organize black army regiments for the Union during the Civil War, Revels was appointed in 1870 by Mississippi to fill Jefferson Davis’ unexpired seat. He left the Senate that same year to accept the presidency of Alcorn College (now Alcorn State University).

Hiram Rhoades Revels
In this cartoon a sickly former Confederate President Jefferson Davis looks on enviously as his U.S. senate seat is filled by Hiram Revels. Davis quotes Iago, the villain from Shakespeare’s Othello.
(Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-108004)



Blanche K. Bruce was the first African American to serve a full term in the senate representing Mississippi from 1874 to 1881. He was later named Register of the Treasury, becoming the first African American to sign his name to the country’s currency.

Blanche K. Bruce
(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-cwpbh-05070)



The First Colored Senator and Representatives
An image of the first African American members of Congress. (Standing) Robert De Large (SC), Jefferson Long (GA) (Seated) Hiram Revels (MS), Ben Turner (AL), Josiah Walls (FL), Joseph Rainey (SC), R. Brown Elliot (SC)
(Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-17564)





African Americans in Government

Jim Crow

“Our wrongs are not so much now in written laws which all may see - but the hidden practices of a people who have not yet abandoned the idea of Mastery and dominion over their fellow man.”

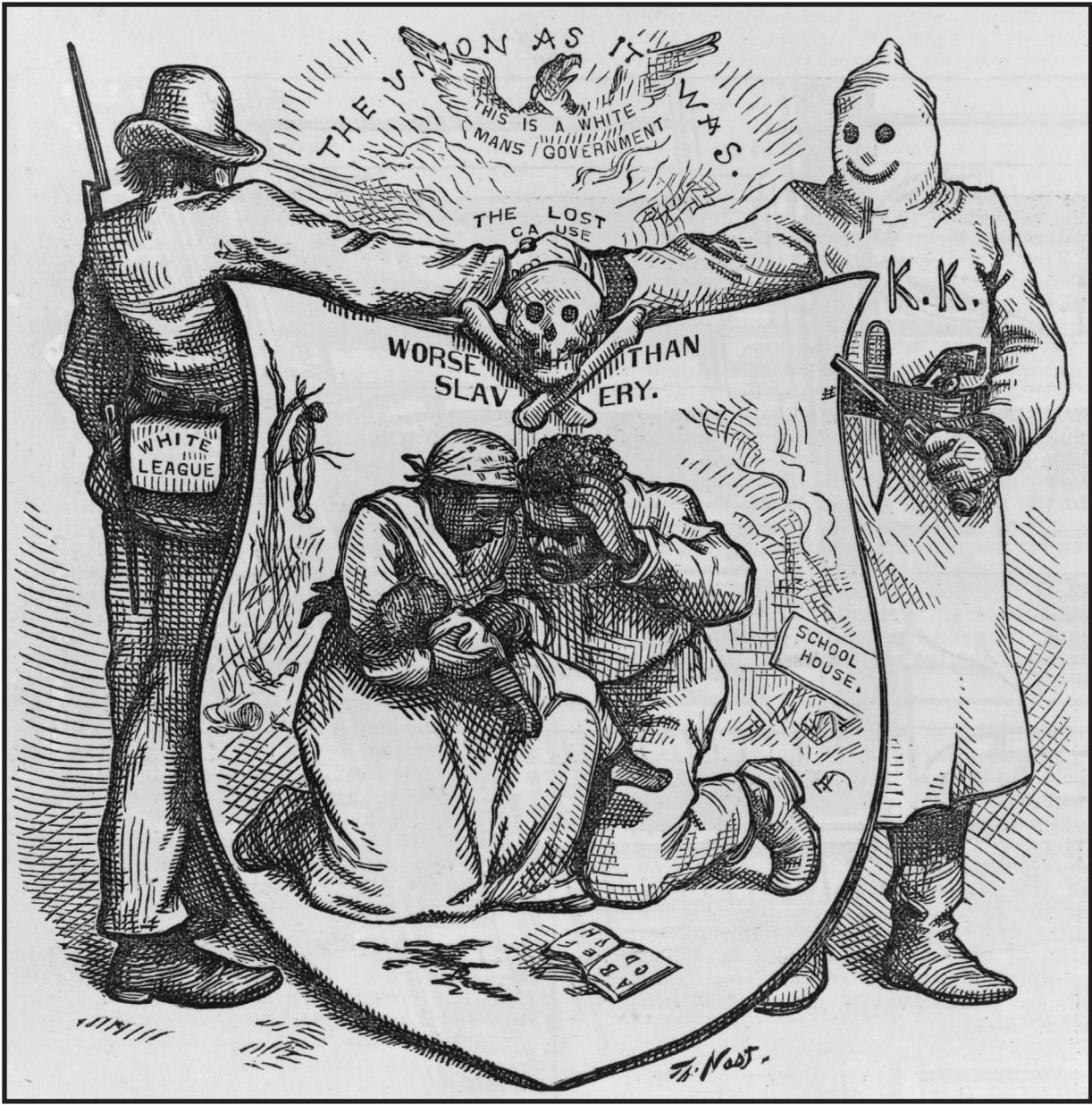
-Frederick Douglass, 1881

By the mid-1870s former Confederates had regained political power, and state governments passed laws designed to restrict African Americans’ civil rights. Domestic terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan attacked African Americans in order to restore white supremacy. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of legal segregation in the case Plessy v. Ferguson.

Jim Crow

The Supreme Court’s ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson gave states a legal means to circumvent African American’s constitutional rights. In addition to voting restrictions, Jim Crow laws touched most aspects of everyday life. Separate (and generally inferior) public facilities were designated for African Americans, including schools, hospitals, and public restrooms.

Many states passed Jim Crow laws concerned with the minutiae of everyday life. For example, Georgia established separate parks for African Americans, Oklahoma outlawed African Americans and whites from boating together, and Birmingham, Alabama prohibited African Americans and whites from playing checkers or dominoes together. These laws were designed to prevent any sort of interracial social life.
(Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-128619)



During the Jim Crow era, poll taxes, literacy tests, and violent intimidation suppressed African Americans from voting. The resulting rapid decline in African American voting led to the disappearance of black government officials from the political scene. George H. White of North Carolina, the last black congressman of the Reconstruction Era, completed his term in office in 1901 and was not reelected.



IDA B. WELLS.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

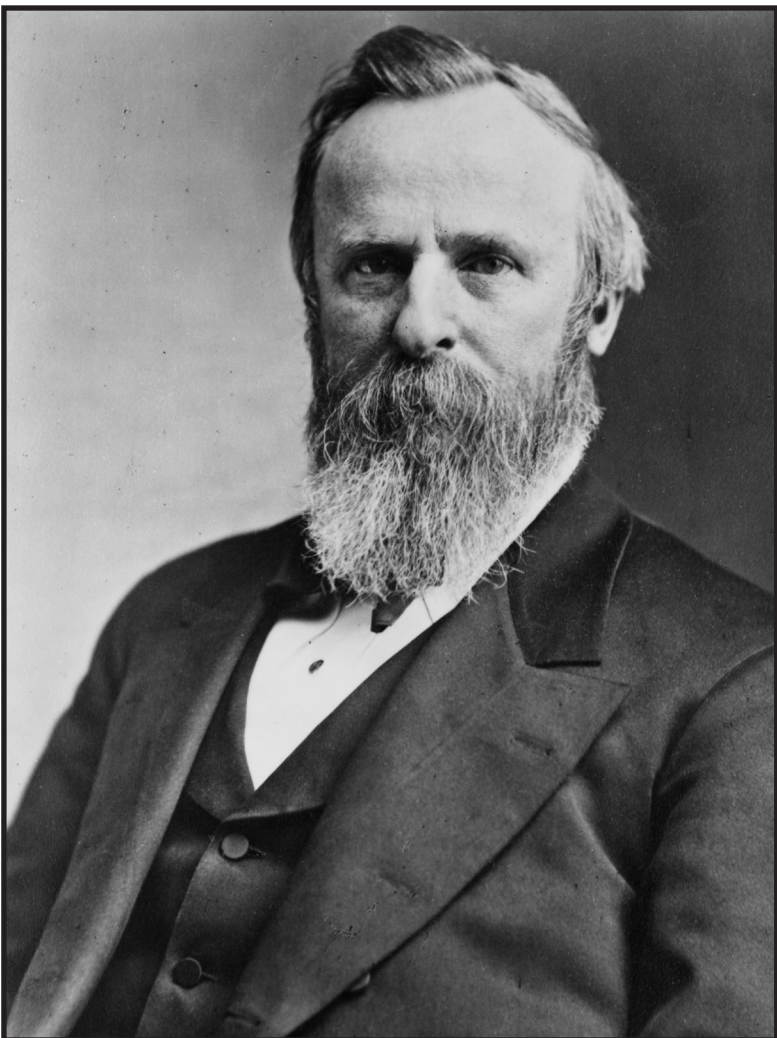
A friend of Frederick Douglass, she fought tirelessly against lynching and other violent crimes against African Americans. A fighter for equal rights and justice, Wells-Barnett became one of the first African American women to run for public office in the United States. In 1930, at age 68, Wells-Barnett campaigned for the Illinois State Legislature, protesting the major party candidates.

(Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-107756)

Rutherford Hayes

The contested 1876 presidential election effectively finished off Reconstruction. The election results were contested in several Southern states. Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes struck a deal with Southern Democrats to back his presidency if he removed federal troops from the South, restoring white social and political control.

(Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-13019)





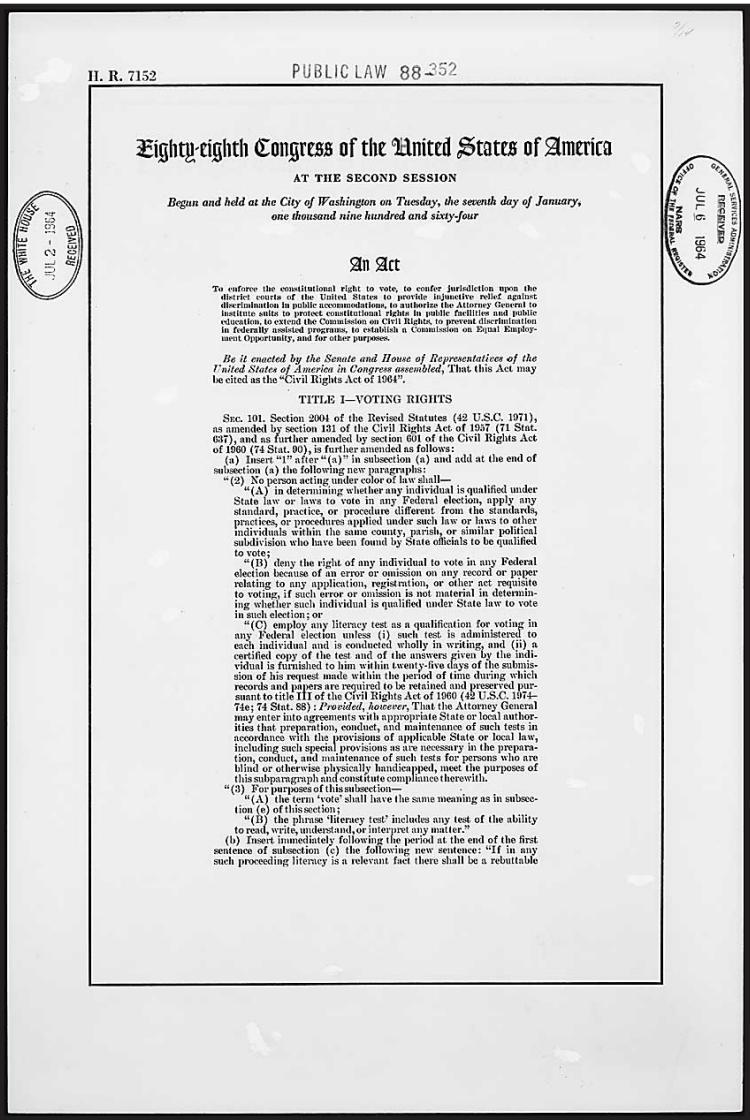
African Americans in Government Civil Rights

“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

-Frederick Douglass, 1881

Facing the hardships of Jim Crow, many African Americans migrated north seeking greater social and economic opportunities. As African American communities grew in Northern cities, they gained political weight.

In 1954, the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned legal segregation in public schools. This victory ushered in the Civil Rights Era, culminating in the passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



Civil Rights Act of 1964

The Act made it illegal for an employer to “fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions or privileges or employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”

(National Archives, 299891)

The Civil Rights Era ushered in the first period of real African American political power. In

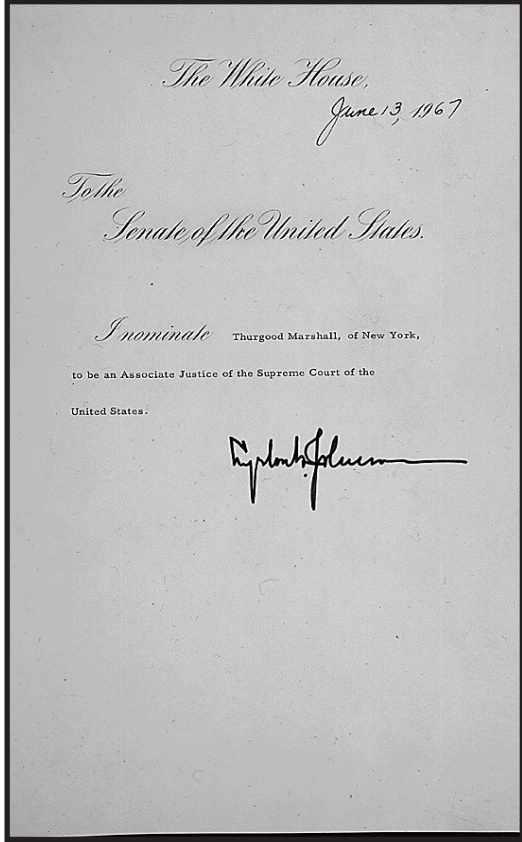
1966 Edward Brooke of Massachusetts became the first African American senator in more than eighty years. Shirley Chisholm of New York was the first African American female representative when she won election in 1968. By 1971, enough African Americans had won election that they formed the Congressional Black Caucus. The legacy of the Civil Rights era continues today with the election in November 2008 of Barack Obama, the nation’s first African American president.



Monroe School

Monroe School in Topeka, Kansas, was the school at the center of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case that ended segregation in schools. The case began when Reverend Oliver Brown and twelve other parents sought to enroll their children in previously segregated schools. On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled the segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Today the school is a National Historic Site within the National Park System.

(*Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site*)



Letter Nominating Thurgood Marshall

This letter from President Lyndon Johnson nominated Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court of the United States. Marshall, who served on the Court from 1967-1991, was instrumental in the legal fight against segregation. Before the Supreme Court, he served as the chief council of the NAACP and was the lawyer for many important cases including *Brown v. Board of Education*. He attended Frederick Douglasss High School in Baltimore, MD.

(Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-13019)



African Americans in Government

The legacy of the civil rights era is immediately apparent in the number of African American elected officials. In 1970, the first year for which statistics are available, there were 1,469 African Americans serving as elected officials. By 1999, there were 8,658.

2008 Senator Barack Obama of Illinois is the first African American elected to the presidency.

1992 Carole Mosely Braun is the first African American woman elected Senator. She is named to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which previously had been all-male and all-white.

Founding members of the CBC: Left to Right: (front row) Rep. Robert Nix Sr., Rep. Charles Diggs Jr., Rep. Shirley Chisholm, Rep. Augustus Hawkins (second row) Rep. Parren Mitchell, Rep. Charles Rangel, Rep. William Clay Sr., Rep. Ronald Delums, Rep. George Collins, Rep Louis Stokes, Rep. Ralph Metcalfe, Rep. John Conyers Jr., Del. Walter Fauntroy

1968 Shirely Chisholm is the first African American woman elected to Congress. A founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus, Chisholm also becomes the first African American major part candidate for the presidency in 1972.

1966 Edward Brooke of Massachusetts becomes the first African American popularly elected to the Senate.

August 10, 1965 Congress passes the Voting Rights Act of 1965, abolishing literacy tests, poll taxes, and other requirements that were used to restrict African American voting in the South.

May 17, 1954 The Supreme Court overturns “separate but equal” public schooling in the ruling of Brown vs. Board of Education. This landmark case sets the stage for the eventual end of segregation.

At right: Attorney Thurgood Marshall and colleagues congratulate each other after the decision.