

Lynch, John R. (1847–1939)

Mississippi. Born a slave. Mulatto. Literate. Photographer, planter, lawyer.



Born in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, Lynch was the son of Patrick Lynch, an Irish-born plantation manager, and a slave woman. Before his death, his father planned for the emancipation of Lynch and his mother, but the friend to whom he entrusted the plan betrayed them, and Lynch remained a slave until freed by the Union army in 1864. He then worked as a cook for the army and as a waiter on a naval vessel. In 1865 he established himself as a photographer in Natchez, Mississippi. Educated in a Natchez school established by Northern aid societies, Lynch became active in Republican politics and was appointed justice of the peace by General Adelbert Ames in 1869. He represented Adams County in the state legislature, 1870–73, serving as speaker, 1872–73. In 1872, Lynch was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and served for three terms: 1873–75 (when he was the youngest member), 1875–77, and 1882–83 (when he was seated after contesting his election defeat). He was defeated for reelection in 1876.

A supporter of President Hayes's Southern policy, Lynch remained a major power in Republican politics to the turn of the century. He was state party chairman, 1881–92, and, with James Hill and Blanche K. Bruce, formed a triumvirate that dominated party affairs. He served as an auditor in the Treasury Department under President Benjamin Harrison and was a delegate to every Republican national convention from 1872 through 1900 (except 1896) and the convention's temporary chairman in 1884. He was the first black to deliver the keynote address at a major party's national convention—the next time did not occur until 1968. According to the census of 1870, Lynch owned \$3,000 in real estate and \$200 in personal property. During the 1880s, he acquired a plantation of fifteen hundred acres near Natchez, and by the turn of the century he owned three more plantations as well as lots in the city and was worth over \$100,000. He studied law in the 1890s and was admitted to the Mississippi bar.

When the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Lynch, now over fifty, was appointed major of volunteers and then served as paymaster in the regular army. In 1912, after retiring from the army, he moved to Chicago, where he published a book, *The Facts of Reconstruction*, and several articles criticizing the then-dominant Dunning school of Reconstruction historiography. In 1930, at a Negro History Week celebration in Washington, D.C., Lynch insisted, "We must make paramount the enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment." He died in Chicago. Lynch's brother, William, also served in the Mississippi legislature. His wife, Ella, was the daughter of Alabama black official James A. Somerville.

John R. Lynch, *Reminiscences of an Active Life: The Autobiography of John Roy Lynch*, ed. John Hope Franklin (Chicago, 1970). Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South 1790–1915* (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 300. John R. Lynch, *The Facts of Reconstruction* (New York, 1913). *Pittsburgh Courier*, 22 February 1930. Vincent P. DeSantis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question—The New Departure Years, 1877–1897* (Baltimore, 1959), 130, 242. Logan and Winston, *Dictionary*, 407–09. Manuscript U.S. Census, 1870.