Rainey, Joseph H. (1832–1887)

In 1870, Rainey was elected to Congress and became the first black seated in the U.S. House of Representatives. He served until 1879 (42d through 45th Congresses), failing to be reelected in 1878. In a notable speech on the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, Rainey said: “For my part, I am not prepared . . . to argue this question from a constitutional standpoint alone. . . . I desire that so broad and liberal a construction be placed upon its provisions as will insure protection to the humblest citizen. . . . Tell me nothing of a constitution which fails to shelter beneath its rightful power the people of a country.” In his farewell speech, on 3 March 1879, Rainey compared the Redeemer government of South Carolina with Reconstruction: “As compared with Governor Hampton's doubtless it [the Republican government] was more extravagant. . . . But . . . can the saving of a few thousand or hundreds of thousands of dollars compensate for the loss of the political heritage of American citizens?”

After leaving Congress, Rainey served for two years as an internal revenue agent, then moved to Washington, D.C., where he failed in a brokerage business. During the 1880s, he supported black emigration from the South. Rainey died in Georgetown, South Carolina. His grandson was a prominent politician in Philadelphia in the 1970s.

See also Figures 3 and 4