

Revels, Hiram R. (1822–1901)

Mississippi. Born free. Mulatto. Literate. Barber, teacher, minister, college president.



Hiram R. Revels

The first black American to serve in either house of Congress, Revels was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina, of mixed black, white, and Indian ancestry. Educated in Fayetteville, where he worked as a barber, Revels subsequently attended a Quaker seminary in Indiana and Knox College in Illinois (1856–57). Ordained an A.M.E. minister in 1845, Revels preached in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas, and Maryland during the 1850s. For a time, he taught school in Saint Louis and was principal of a black high school in Baltimore. In 1854, he was briefly imprisoned in Missouri for “preaching the gospel to Negroes.” Once, while traveling with his family, Revels was ordered into the smoking car on a train in Kansas. “I do not wish my wife and children to be there and listen to such language,” he insisted, and was allowed to remain in the first-class car.

During the Civil War, Revels helped raise black regiments in Maryland and Missouri and served briefly as an army chaplain. He came to Mississippi in 1865, worked for the Freedmen’s Bureau, and chaired a black meeting in Vicksburg to raise money for schools. After leaving the state for two years because of ill health, he returned to Mississippi, serving as an alderman in Natchez in 1868, and was elected to the state Senate from Adams County in 1869. Soon after taking his seat, Revels was elected to fill the state’s unexpired term in the U.S. Senate, and served from February 1870 to March 1871. Upon the death of James Lynch, Revels served as Mississippi’s secretary of state, December 1872–September 1873.

After leaving the Senate, Revels was appointed the first president of Alcorn Agricultural College, later Alcorn University, the new state college for blacks in Rodney, Mississippi. He was dismissed in 1874, when he defected from the Republican to the Democratic party, but was reappointed in 1876 by the new Democratic administration of the state, serving to 1882. Subsequently, he devoted his attention to the work of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), which he had joined during the Civil War. Although considered a conservative in Reconstruction politics, Revels in 1876 protested, unsuccessfully, his church’s plans to hold racially segregated annual conferences in the South. In the 1890s, he owned a plantation near Natchez.

Revels’s daughter Susan edited a black newspaper in Seattle. Horace Cayton, the coauthor of the classic study *Black Metropolis*, and Revels Cayton, a black labor leader, were his grandsons.

See also Figure 4

Joseph A. Borome, “The Autobiography of Hiram Rhodes Revels Together with Some Letters by and about Him,” *Midwest Journal*, 5 (1953–53), 79–92. William B. Gravely, “Hiram Revels Protests Racial Separation in the Methodist Episcopal Church (1876),” *Methodist History*, 8 (1970), 13–20. Julius E. Thompson, “Hiram R. Revels, 1827–1901: A Biography” (unpub. diss., Princeton University, 1973). Vernon L. Wharton, *The Negro in Mississippi, 1865–1890* (Chapel Hill, 1947), 271. *Congressional Globe*, 41st Congress, 3d Session, 1060. Information provided by Ronald L. F. Davis. Walker, *Rock*, 116–18. Logan and Winston, *Dictionary*, 523–24.