

Cain, Richard H. (1825–1887)

South Carolina. Born free. Black. Literate. Minister, editor, college president.



A two-term congressman from South Carolina, Cain was born in Greenbriar County, Virginia, the son of an African-born father and a Cherokee Indian mother. In 1831, he moved with his parents to Ohio, where he was educated in local schools. As a youth, he worked on Ohio River steamboats. Licensed to preach in the Methodist Episcopal church in 1844, Cain abandoned the denomination for the A.M.E. church after experiencing discrimination. He was assigned to a pulpit in Muscatine, Iowa, and ordained a bishop in 1859. After attending Wilberforce University, Cain became a minister in Brooklyn, New York, during the Civil War and attended the 1864 national black convention at Syracuse, New York.

Cain came to South Carolina as a missionary in 1865 and reorganized the Emmanuel Church in Charleston, which became the largest A.M.E. congregation in the state and a powerful political base for Cain. He edited the *South Carolina Leader*, later renamed the *Missionary Record*, 1866–68. He quickly became involved in Reconstruction politics, attending the state black convention of 1865, serving in the constitutional convention of 1868 and in the state Senate, 1868–70. Along with Martin Delany, Cain was a severe critic of carpetbaggers in the Republican party and was a leader of blacks committed to political reform. He failed in a bid for the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor in 1872, but was elected to Congress, serving 1873–75. He did not run for reelection but in 1876 was elected to a second term, 1877–79. Cain also served as chairman of the Charleston Republican party, 1870–71, as a member of the militia and of a fire company, and as president of the black-owned Enterprise Railroad. According to the 1870 census, he owned \$5,000 in real estate and \$500 in personal property. He also became the target of threats of violence. Cain's adopted daughter later recalled: "From the moment he became

a candidate for delegate to the Constitutional Convention, a guard was necessary night and day to watch our homes. . . . We, his family, lived in constant fear at all times."

Cain was an outspoken advocate of political action to secure land for the freedmen. "Give them of the confiscated plantations," he wrote in June 1865. "Let them have homesteads. . . . Then we shall see the Southern States blooming. The cotton fields and rice plantations will produce as never before, . . . and universal prosperity will reign supreme." At the constitutional convention, Cain proposed petitioning Congress to appropriate money to assist blacks in purchasing land. "The abolition of slavery," he said, "has thrown these people upon their own resources. I know the philosopher of the New York *Tribune* says, 'root, hog, or die,' but in the meantime we ought to have some place to root." He opposed a proposal for debtor relief, arguing that indebted landowners ought to be compelled to place their lands on the market. Later, Cain served as a member of the state land commission. He also became involved in an ambitious project to buy three thousand acres of land and sell it in small plots to freedmen. The plan's bankruptcy led to Cain's indictment for fraud, but he was never brought to trial. In Congress, Cain spoke strongly in support of civil rights legislation: "Spare us our liberties; give us peace; give us a chance to live; give us an honest chance in the race of life; place no obstruction in our way; oppress us not; give us an equal chance; and we ask no more of the American people."

During Reconstruction, Cain rejected talk of black emigration. "We are not going one foot or one inch from this land," he said in 1874. "Our mothers and our fathers and our grandfathers and great-grandfathers have died here. . . . Here we have made this country rich and great by our labor and toil. . . . We feel that we are part and parcel of this great nation." With the end of Reconstruction, however, Cain supported the Liberia emigration movement of 1877–78. "There are thousands," he wrote in 1877, "who are willing and ready to leave. . . . The colored people of the South are tired of the constant struggle for life and liberty with such results as the 'Mississippi Plan.'" Cain himself left South Carolina in 1880 to become an A.M.E. bishop in Louisiana and Texas. He served briefly as president of Paul Quinn College in Waco, Texas, then became bishop of the diocese of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. He died in Washington, D.C.

Rawick, *American Slave*, Supp. 2, IV, 271. *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina* (2 vols.: Charleston, 1868), I, 108, 379–80. *Congressional Record*, 43d Congress, 1st Session, 902, 2d Session, 982. *Christian Recorder*, 17 June 1865. Richard H. Cain to William Coppinger, 25 January 1877, American Colonization Society Papers, Library of Congress. Holt, *Black over White*, 165, app. Bleser, *Promised Land*, 42n., 77n. Logan and Winston, *Dictionary*, 84–85. Bailey, *Senate*, I, 246–48. Information provided by Richard L. Hume.