

Haralson, Jeremiah (1846–1916)

Alabama. Born a slave. Black. Literate. Minister.



One of three blacks to represent Alabama in Congress during Reconstruction, Haralson was born near Columbus, Georgia, and remained a slave until 1865. He worked as a field hand and was once sold on the auction block. He moved to Alabama after the Civil War and became a leading figure in Republican politics, representing Dallas County in the state House of Representatives, 1870–72, and Senate, 1872–75. Allegedly, he received a fifty-dollar bribe from a railroad company while in the legislature. He was president of the Alabama Labor Union convention in 1871.

In 1874, running as an independent against the regular Republican candidate, Haralson was elected to Congress on a platform strongly supporting Charles Sumner's Civil Rights Bill, although he opposed making an issue of its provision for integrated schools. He served one term, 1875–77. In 1876, he and former Congressman James T. Rapier ran for the same congressional seat, resulting in a disputed victory by a third, white, candidate. In 1878, Congress declared

Haralson the actual winner but adjourned before he could take his seat.

"Black as the ace of spades and with the brogue of the cornfield," as one Alabama newspaper described him, Haralson in the mid-1870s was "by far the most prominent Negro in the state." He headed one of two rival delegations to the Republican national convention of 1876, and the delegates decided to seat Haralson's group. John H. Henry, a local Republican leader, called him "a most powerful campaign speaker," and Frederick Douglass said he was one of the most gifted debaters he had heard, with "humor enough in him to supply a half dozen circus clowns." During the 1876 campaign, Haralson delighted a black audience by ridiculing the Democrats' obsession with racial intermarriage—he assured them "he would not marry a white woman unless she was rich. A poor white woman he wouldn't look at twice." But he also spoke powerfully and presciently about the dangers of Democratic Redemption, warning that "the democratic party, if they got into power, would inaugurate slavery in a new form; not such as it was, but by depriving us of our right to vote; and the gentlemen who used to own us would represent us, and get up in the American Congress and say that we voted for them and sent them there, when we did not."

After Reconstruction, Haralson held patronage positions in the U.S. custom house in Baltimore, and in the Interior Department and Pension Bureau in Washington. He opposed the Exodus movement of 1879. He failed in bids to return to Congress, in 1878 and 1884. In 1884, Haralson moved to Louisiana, where he farmed, and then to Arkansas in 1904. After returning to Selma in 1912, he moved to Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado, where he engaged in mining. Reportedly, he was "killed by wild beasts."

44th Congress, 2d Session, Senate Report 704, 149. Bailey, *Neither Carpetbaggers nor Scalawags*, 199, 302–03, 307. Virginia Hamilton, *Alabama: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1977), 72–77. Alston Fitts III, *Selma: Queen City of the Blackbelt* (Selma, Ala., 1989), 79–81. John H. Henry to William E. Chandler, 15 July 1872, William E. Chandler Papers, Library of Congress. *Montgomery Alabama State Journal*, 27 June 1874. Logan and Winston, *Dictionary*, 286–87. *Biographical Directory*, 1130.