



**Reading
Through
History**

Hiram Revels

Excerpt from African American History
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Hiram Revels

The first African American senator in United States history was Hiram Revels. How did Revels become a senator? How long did he hold this position?

Hiram Rhodes Revels was born in 1827 in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Despite living in the South, his parents were not slaves, but instead were free blacks who were of mixed African and European ancestry. While still a boy, Hiram became an apprentice barber to his older brother who owned a barber shop.

Revels attended Union County Quaker Seminary and Darke County Seminary before becoming an Episcopalian minister. In the 1840s and 50s, he worked as a preacher throughout the Midwest. He ministered in Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas, and Louisiana. In many of these places, he met with opposition for trying to preach the Bible to African Americans. Once he was even imprisoned for his ministry.



During the Civil War, he served as a chaplain in the United States Army. He also assisted in recruiting two black regiments to fight for the Union. Following the war, he renewed his ministry and settled in Natchez, Mississippi. In 1869, Revels was elected to the Mississippi State Senate, representing Adams County.

At the time, United States senators were not elected by popular vote. Instead, they were elected by a vote of the state legislature. Mississippi had been without senators since the Civil War because the previous senators had resigned their positions when Mississippi seceded. In 1870, the Mississippi state senate voted for Hiram Revels to fill one of these two vacancies.

Words to watch for:
apprentice seminary
tenure oratory

Southern Democrats were highly opposed to Revels taking his seat as a senator. The issue was debated for two days. Democrats argued that Revels was not qualified to be a senator since one of the qualifications was being a citizen of the US for at least nine years. African Americans had not been regarded as citizens until the passage of the 14th Amendment in 1868, therefore, they argued, he had only been a citizen for two years.

Those who supported Revels' appointment argued that he had voted for many years, which qualified him as a citizen. Additionally, they argued that the fundamental reason the Civil War had been fought was to end the subordination of the black race.

On February 25th, 1870, the senate voted in favor of allowing Revels to take his seat. He was sworn in and became the first African American to sit in the United States Senate. As senator, he quietly and diligently fought for the equality of African Americans. During his brief tenure in the US Senate, he impressed reporters with his oratory abilities. His time as senator came to an end on March 3rd, 1871.

After finishing his time in the US Senate, Revels went on to become the president of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College (now known as Alcorn State University) where he also taught philosophy. He also briefly served as Mississippi's secretary of state.

Multiple Choice: *Select the choice that completes the statement or answers the question.*

1. _____ Which of the following best summarizes Hiram Revels' early life?
 - a. He worked as a butcher and then became a teacher.
 - b. He served in the US Navy before becoming a college professor.
 - c. He was an apprentice barber and then became an Episcopalian minister.
 - d. He worked as a newspaper boy and eventually became a journalist.

2. _____ Which of the following correctly identifies Revels' activities during the Civil War?
 - a. He worked as a spy for the Union Army and passed along secret information.
 - b. He served as a general, becoming the first African American general in US history.
 - c. He worked as a cook and later served as an aide to General Ulysses S. Grant.
 - d. He served as a chaplain and assisted in recruiting two black regiments for the Union.

3. _____ Which of the following positions did Hiram Revels *not* hold?
 - a. Mississippi State Senator
 - b. United States Senator
 - c. President of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College
 - d. Governor of Mississippi

4. _____ Which of the following arguments did Hiram Revels' opponents attempt to use in an effort to prevent him from taking his seat in the US Senate?
 - a. They argued that he had not been a citizen for at least nine years.
 - b. They argued that he had not been popularly elected by the people of Mississippi.
 - c. They argued that the Mississippi senate seats were already occupied.
 - d. They argued that the governor had to approve all senatorial appointments.

5. _____ What is most significant about Hiram Revels' tenure in the United States Senate?
 - a. He was the first senator from Mississippi in the post-Civil War era.
 - b. He was the first African American senator in US history.
 - c. He quietly and diligently fought for the equality of African Americans.
 - d. He impressed reporters with his oratory abilities.

Vocabulary: *Match each word with its correct definition. Consider how the word is used in the lesson. This might help you define each term. Use a dictionary to help if necessary.*

- | | |
|------------------|------------|
| a. apprentice | d. tenure |
| b. seminary | e. oratory |
| c. subordination | |
6. _____ a school that prepares students for ministry or priesthood
 7. _____ the period of time one is in office
 8. _____ the skill or eloquence of public speaking
 9. _____ a person who works for another in order to learn a trade
 10. _____ placing another in a lower rank or position

Guided Reading: *Fill in the blanks below to create complete sentences.*

1. Hiram Revels' parents were not slaves, instead they were _____ blacks of mixed African and European ancestry.

2. Revels attended Union County Quaker Seminary and Darke County Seminary before becoming an _____ minister.

3. Once, Revels was _____ for his ministry.

4. In 1869, Revels was elected to the Mississippi State _____.

5. Mississippi's previous senators had resigned their positions when Mississippi _____.

6. In 1870, the Mississippi state senate voted for Hiram Revels to fill one of these two _____.

7. Southern _____ were highly opposed to Revels taking his seat as a senator.

8. African Americans had not been regarded as citizens until the passage of the _____ in 1868.

9. As senator, Revels quietly and diligently fought for the _____ of African Americans.

10. Revels went on to become the president of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, where he also taught _____.

Summarize: *Answer the following questions in the space provided. Attempt to respond in a complete sentence for each question. Be sure to use correct capitalization and punctuation!*

1. Who was opposed to Revels taking his seat as a senator?
2. What qualification to become a senator did some argue that Hiram Revels did not meet?
3. When did Revels officially become a United States Senator?
4. Where did Revels settle after the Civil War?
5. Why did Revels' ministry meet with opposition?
6. How were senators chosen at the time?

Student Response: *Write a paragraph addressing the questions raised below. A thorough response should consist of three to five complete sentences.*

7. The lesson states that Revels "quietly and diligently" worked for the equality of African Americans. Why do you suppose he chose this approach? Answer as thoroughly as possible.

Answer Key:

**Hiram Revels:
Multiple Choice:**

- 1) C
- 2) D
- 3) D
- 4) A
- 5) B

Vocabulary:

- 6) B
- 7) D
- 8) E
- 9) A
- 10) C

Guided Reading:

- 1) Free
- 2) Episcopalian
- 3) Imprisoned
- 4) Senate
- 5) Seceded
- 6) Vacancies or seats
- 7) Democrats
- 8) 14th Amendment
- 9) Equality
- 10) Philosophy

Summarize:

1. Southern Democrats were opposed to him taking his seat.
2. They claimed he had not been a citizen for nine years.
3. He officially became a senator on February 25, 1870.
4. Revels settled in Natchez, Mississippi.
5. He was trying to teach the Bible to African Americans.
6. Senators were selected by a vote of the state legislature.

Student Response:

7. Student answers will vary.