



Black Milestones on Capitol Hill

January 14, 2003

1870

Rev. Hiram R. Revels (R) of Mississippi becomes the first Black U.S. Senator, filling the unexpired term of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

1870

Joseph H. Rainey (R) of Mississippi is elected as the first Black seated in the U.S. House of Representatives.

1872

Richard Harvey Cain (R) of South Carolina becomes the first Black clergyman elected to Congress.

1875

Blanche Bruce (R) of Mississippi is the first Black elected to a full term in the U.S. Senate.

1924

A.P. Collins of New York becomes the first Black delegate seated at a Democratic National Convention. Collins, an alternate delegate, replaces a white delegate who could not attend due to illness.

1928

Oscar Stanton DePriest (R) of Chicago becomes the first Black elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in the 20th century, representing Michigan's 1st Congressional District.

1934

Arthur W. Mitchell (D) of Chicago narrowly defeats incumbent Rep. Oscar DePriest.

1942

William L. Dawson (D) of Chicago wins election to Congress, succeeding Rep. Arthur Mitchell. Dawson would go on to serve twenty-seven years in Congress.

1944

Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., pastor of the 15,000-member Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New York, is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Powell steered an unprecedented and unmatched sixty pieces of major legislation through Congress. As chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, Powell oversaw the passage of major legislation, including:

- Title I of the Education Act
- Head Start
- Manpower Development Training Act
- Vocational Education Act
- National Defense Education Act

During his chairmanship, only two bills reported from Powell's committee were defeated.

1954

Charles C. Diggs, Jr. (D) of Detroit is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives at age thirty-two. Diggs would go on to distinguish himself in the area of foreign relations.

1964

John Conyers, Jr. (D) of Detroit is elected to represent Michigan's 1st Congressional District. Conyers was the principal sponsor of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He also was an early opponent of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Conyers would later sponsor legislation establishing the Martin Luther King, Jr. federal holiday. He has also sponsored legislation calling for a commission to study the issue of reparations for U.S. descendants of slavery.

1964

Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

1966

Edward Brooke (R) of Massachusetts becomes the first Black U.S. Senator in the 20th century. He would vote against Nixon Supreme Court nominees Clement F. Haynsworth, Jr., G. Harrold Carswell, and William H. Rehnquist. Brooke also opposed the Nixon administration's Southeast Asia policy, the invasion of Cambodia, and supported efforts to limit American involvement in Vietnam. He was the first senator to publicly call for President Nixon's resignation. Senator Brooke served two terms before being defeated in 1978.

1968

Shirley Chisholm (D) of Brooklyn, New York is elected to represent the 12th Congressional District, making her the first Black woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

1969

Congressman Charles Diggs organizes Black members of Congress into the Democratic Select Committee, precursor to the Congressional Black Caucus.

1969

Democratic Select Committee holds hearings investigating the Chicago police killings of two Black Panther leaders, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. The deaths were considered to be the result of a conspiracy between local Chicago police and the FBI.

1970

Democratic Select Committee convenes a hearing on the campus of Jackson State University to investigate the killing of two students protesting the Cambodian invasion by Mississippi state police.

1970

Parren J. Mitchell (D) of Baltimore becomes the first Black elected to Congress from the state of Maryland. Mitchell, brother of NAACP Washington Bureau Chief Clarence Mitchell, became a major proponent of Black business development and economic empowerment.

1970

The Joint Center for Political Studies is established by Howard University, Metropolitan Applied Research Center (MARC) of New York and Black members of Congress. Frank Reeves, a faculty member at Howard University's Law School, is selected as the first executive director. The new organization receives a grant from the Ford Foundation.

1970

The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) is established. The thirteen original members were:

- Charles D. Diggs, Jr. (D-MI)
- John Conyers (D-MI)
- Robert N.C. Nix (D-PA)
- Augustus Hawkins (D-CA)
- Shirley Chisholm (D-NY)
- Louis Stokes (D-OH)
- George Collins (D-IL)
- Ronald Dellums (D-CA)
- Walter Fauntroy (D-DC)
- Ralph Metcalfe (D-IL)
- Parren J. Mitchell (D-MD)
- Charles Rangel (D-NY)
- William Clay, Sr. (D-MO)

1971

First Congressional Black Caucus Dinner is held in June at the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington, DC. Author Ossie Davis is the featured speaker. Among memorable passages, Davis appealed directly to the members of the CBC:

“Give us a plan of action...a ten Black Commandments, simple, strong, that we can carry in our hearts and in our memories no matter where we are and reach out and touch and feel the reassurance that there is behind everything we do a simple, moral, intelligent plan that must be fulfilled in the course of time even if all of our leaders, one by one, fall in battle. Somebody will rise and say “Brother!” Someone will rise and say ‘Our leader died while we were on page three of the plan. Now that the funeral is over let us proceed to page four’...”

1972

Barbara Jordan (D) of Houston is elected to represent the 18th Congressional District of Texas. Rep. Jordan would gain national attention during the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment hearings of President Richard Nixon.

1972

Rep. George Collins (D) of Chicago is killed in a plane crash traveling to Chicago's Midway Airport.

1976

Rep. Mitchell's amendments to Public Law 95-89 established the federal set-aside program. The United States Supreme Court upheld the “Mitchell Amendment” as constitutional in July 1980.

1979

CBC members take issue with President Carter's firing of U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young following the diplomat's meeting with representatives of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In reaction, the CBC honors Young and invited him to be the keynote speaker at their annual dinner.

1980

Many CBC members continue to be disappointed with the Carter administration over its failure to fully implement the Hawkins-Humphrey Full Employment Act.

1980

Rep. Ronald Dellums (D) of California speaks before the Democratic National Convention in New York City and subsequently calls into question President Carter's relationship with the Black community.

1985

Rep. William Gray (D) of Philadelphia makes history with his election to the position of chairman of the Democratic Caucus.

1985

Rep. William Gray is elevated to the chairmanship of the House Budget Committee.

1989

While en route on a mission to feed the hungry in Ethiopia, Rep. Mickey Leland is killed in an airplane crash.

1992

Carol Mosely Braun (D) of Illinois is elected as the first Black woman to serve in the U.S. Senate. She would serve one term before losing significant support due to several questionable episodes.

2001

Rep. Barbara Lee (D) of California casts the lone vote against H.J. Resolution 94 authorizing the use of force in reprisal to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. She is re-elected in 2002, surviving a massive effort by opponents to defeat her.

Sources:

Black Americans in Congress, 1870-1989 Bruce A. Ragsdale and Joel D. Trees (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1989.

Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870-1991 William L. Clay, Sr. (New York: Amistad Press), 1992.