

A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow

SOUTH CAROLINA'S GEORGE WASHINGTON MURRAY



JOHN F. MARSZALEK

A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow

New Perspectives on the History of the South



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JOHN F. MARSZALEK

Foreword by John David Smith

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For John, Chris, and Jamie,
Shannon 1 and Shannon 2,
Will, Emily, and Col

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Foreword

Historians and writers from Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, C. Vann Woodward, and Howard Zinn to Wilbur J. Cash, William Faulkner, and Lee Smith have underscored the South's distinctiveness. For many persons the South signifies more than a region. For them it represents an idea, an abstraction, even an ideology. For some the South has become an obsession. Since the colonial period, the South has been both connected to and distanced from the rest of North America. Its settlement pattern, its crops, and, most significantly, its commitment to racial slavery earmarked the Old South as different from the rest of the nation. As Woodward noted in 1960, the South has many "burdens." Its defeat in the Civil War and its experiences during and after Reconstruction left an indelible blot on the fabric of southern history. Yet in the twenty-first century, the South seems very much "American"—more like the rest of the country, not some mythic land apart.

Dating back to the 1880s, historians and critics have defined and redefined southern history in innumerable ways. The "Nationalist" historians, the "Dunning School," the "Agrarians," the "Revisionists," the "Postrevisionists," the Marxists, and, today, all manner of postmodernists have tried to squeeze some contemporary meaning from southern history. Historians and others regularly interpret the region's history and culture in such varied journals and magazines as the *Journal of Southern History*, *Southern Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southern Living*, *Southern Exposure*, and *Southern Cultures*. In 1979 the *Encyclopedia of Southern History* appeared, followed ten years later by the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Both within and beyond the region, there seems to be an insatiable appetite for information on the South and its people.

In fact, no region in America, including New England and the West, has received as much in-depth analysis and reflection as has the American South. Insiders (native southerners) and outsiders (non-southerners, including an unusually large number of northern and European specialists on the South) agree that the Southland has a particular *Weltanschauung*, one loaded with irony, pathos, paradox, and racial and class conflict. In some universities southern history long has reigned as a major research specialty. They confer doctorates in the field. Many academic publishers consider "southern stud-

ies” a strong part of their list. Books about the South sell on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line and overseas. Associations and institutions sponsor regular symposia and conferences regionally, nationally, and internationally on the South’s past.

In the last century, when the South ranked as “the nation’s economic problem No. 1,” sociologists dissected the region’s pathologies, especially its historic race problem and poverty. Today, social scientists and economists marvel at the “Sun Belt”—its thriving and alluring prosperity built atop longstanding anti-union sentiment, its daunting skyscrapers, its rapid transit systems, its social and racial progress. Atlanta, the region’s bourgeois Mecca, has numerous lesser rivals throughout the former Confederacy—Dallas, New Orleans, Miami, Nashville, Charlotte, Raleigh, and Richmond. Cable television, chain restaurants, New York department stores, malls and their accompanying outlet shops—even the “national edition” of the *New York Times* (printed in several southern cities and delivered to the doorsteps of thousands of southerners)—dot the southern landscape like the proverbial cotton plants of old.

An appreciation of the South’s distinctiveness and its diversity lies at the heart of the University Press of Florida’s *New Perspectives on the History of the South* series. This broadly based series publishes the highest quality new scholarship on the history of the American South. The books cover all aspects and periods of the southern past, with special emphasis on the region’s cultural, economic, intellectual, and social history.

John F. Marszalek’s *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow: South Carolina’s George Washington Murray*, the latest volume in the series, carefully unravels the role of race, class, and political factionalism in one state at the fin de siècle.

Marszalek employs biography as a means to explore the determined but ultimately unsuccessful efforts of George Washington Murray (1853–1926) and other black southerners to retain voting rights during the flurry of local disfranchisement legislation and practice that blanketed the South during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Murray, born a slave in Sumter County, South Carolina, was a self-made man. He succeeded as a teacher, farmer, inventor, and politician, serving two terms (1893–95, 1896–97) in Congress. Murray was one of the last two post–Civil War African Americans to serve in Congress before Jim Crow laws virtually disfranchised black southerners. Not until 1928 did another African American serve in the House of Representatives. It took the 1965 Voting Rights Act to widen the possible number of blacks in Congress.

Marszalek interprets Murray as a competent and conscientious politician who, when necessary, cooperated with Democrats but who consistently sought to improve the plight of blacks by favoring federal civil rights legislation. Murray urged blacks to participate in politics but, like Booker T. Washington, also endorsed industrial education for the children of the freed people. Murray opposed emigration, initially voted for the free and unlimited coinage of silver, and consistently encouraged blacks to acquire property and to combat white prejudice by patronizing black businesses.

In charting Murray's political rise and fall, Marszalek also dissects the internecine struggles that killed South Carolina's Republican party as it lost battle after battle against the Democrats' white supremacy campaigns. While Marszalek explains how skin color differentiation contributed to the factionalism that plagued the state's black leadership, he insists that the "color issue was not a major issue of Republican factional division and conflict." Rather the "crushing prejudice" of whites unleashed self-destructive tendencies among African American leaders. According to Marszalek, the factions "blamed each other for their own plight even though, in truth, the real blame lay with a prejudiced South Carolina white society."

Marszalek's meticulously researched biography of Murray emphasizes the seemingly unlimited power of white racism and the powerlessness of black Republicans during the rise of Jim Crow. The evolution from rigid segregation to desegregation and the triumph of biracial democracy in the last century comprise essential elements in the history of today's decidedly distinctive and diverse South.

John David Smith
Series Editor

Preface

The last paragraph of a standard book on nineteenth-century black congressmen summarizes the traditional view of George W. Murray and the other black men who served in Congress. Writing in 1940, Samuel Denny Smith said: "They served to keep alive race friction, and they were used as a political football by white political groups of all persuasions." Though they "were rather well equipped by education, previous political experience, and wealth, and . . . most of them had considerable white blood in their veins and were frequently aided by white friends," they were still failures. "Their lack of accomplishment," Smith concluded, "was an argument that the Negro would do well, for a time at least, to forego political ambition in this realm and to confine his efforts to other vocations where he had a better chance of success."¹

A famous study of the post-Reconstruction Republican party in South Carolina takes a similar view. James Welch Patton wrote in 1949 that Palmetto State Republicans were conspicuous only for their venality. Though admitting that white violence was partially to blame for Republican failure in those years, he said, "especial importance must be attached to the nature and composition of the party itself." South Carolina Republicans were "a political fiction," he insisted, "an aggregation of federal office holders and placemen, held together by a desire to catch such crumbs as might fall from the national Republican table when that party was in power." They opposed any reformers, Patton wrote, and they failed "to adopt a positive program based upon pertinent local issues and in the interest of a more wholesome state government." Their conventions had a "racial texture" and "moral complexion" that were "mottled" and filled with "wild Gullah oratory," and their political activities in general were "a repetition of some of the more lurid phases of the Reconstruction era." Republican candidates, such as Murray whom Patton listed by name, "if not downright dishonest were certainly believed to be."²

Writing in 1992, Harris M. Bailey, Jr. expressed similar beliefs. "Leadership was the greatest failing of the state's Republican party. The leadership was unable to quash the flare-up of personal disputes in the party or control the growth of factionalism. If the leadership had adopted coalition strategies, fusion tickets with factional elements in the Democratic party might have made the party more competitive in statewide elections. . . . The black and white

leadership *allowed* the Democrats to dictate the content of political debate in South Carolina. Substantial questions of policy and ideology were subjugated to questions of race and, to a subliminal degree, questions of caste.”³

The standard historical view of Murray and the South Carolina Republican Party, therefore, was that both Murray and his party were venal failures. They were typical descendants of their Reconstruction predecessors, so hostilely characterized in traditional but now discredited Reconstruction historiography.

Most modern historical accounts of Republican Party and black life in the post-Reconstruction South have corrected many such erroneous views. George B. Tindall’s and I. A. Newby’s excellent books on South Carolina blacks during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth are examples of this much needed revisionism. Why, then, is a new book on George W. Murray and South Carolina Republicans needed? Most books on black life in the South do not deal with the unique South Carolina situation in depth, while Newby and Tindall do not analyze Murray, the Republicans, or disfranchisement in any detail. Loren Schweninger’s excellent study of southern black property holders does not mention Murray, despite the large tracts of land he owned. A book on Murray and South Carolina Republicans will fill a genuine need by providing information and insight not available elsewhere.

South Carolina is a state whose race relations were particularly contentious in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth. It had the highest percentage of black citizens of any state in the Union, and the cries for white supremacy were consequently shriller there than anywhere else in the South. The legend of South Carolina Reconstruction and the “redemption” led by Wade Hampton created a historical mythology that gave black-white interaction a sharp edge. A dread of “black domination” existed that made white South Carolinians more virulently opposed to Republicans and black voters than were any other southern whites. Only in Mississippi, whose white population was second to South Carolina’s did Republican disfranchisement come earlier. Similarly Florida blacks ceased being a factor in state politics by the middle of the 1880s. Other southern states, however, were less uncompromisingly anti-Republican: for example, the Republican Party in Louisiana and Tennessee was heavily white. Texas, Alabama, Virginia, and Arkansas had active fusion movements in the 1890s, while, in Georgia the possibility of fusion caused two Democratic factions to appeal openly for black votes. North Carolina experienced a successful fusion of black and white Republicans and Populists,

which merger briefly took control of the state government. In Maryland, Republicans were such an integral part of the two-party system that what racial attacks there were were considered an assault not only against black voters but also against the two-party system.

South Carolina never experienced such flexibility. After its bloody “redemption” from Reconstruction, the Palmetto State passed an anti-black registration and voting law in 1882, and it used every other available legal and illegal method to frustrate black voters. The fear of benefiting blacks and Republicans, be they white or black, kept any crack in white political solidarity from spreading. There was severe Democratic factionalism in the 1890s, but no fusion with Republicans resulted. South Carolina’s animosity toward black voters and Republicans was too intense to permit such manipulation. South Carolina did not even have a Populist movement similar to that in other southern states to act as a focus for fusion with Republicans. Ben Tillman and his farmer group took control of the Democratic Party so early and so completely that they had little interest in Populism. The defeated Conservative Democratic faction despised the victorious Tillmanites, but fear of black domination kept them from appealing forcefully to black voters and fusing with Republicans in opposition to the Tillmanites.

Such racism also kept several of the state’s so-called Lily White Republican movements from gaining success. For a white to become a Republican in South Carolina was to invite disgrace; therefore, few men, whatever their disagreement with Democratic leaders or policy, dared leave the Democratic Party to join the state Republicans. Anyone who became a Republican was immediately accused of undermining white political control and thus was considered a traitor to his race.

This book attempts to describe the life of a black congressman and his reaction and that of his political party to this suffocating political climate. George W. Murray’s political career did not demonstrate criminal incompetence; it demonstrated determined effort to overcome his state’s racist discrimination. The story of the state Republican Party, of which Murray was such a key member, is the tale of an organization attempting to survive systematic local disfranchisement and the complementary national GOP unconcern. White South Carolina society would not allow Republicans within the state to participate meaningfully in South Carolina’s political life, while national Republican party leaders saw Palmetto State Republicans as having no function other than delegate votes at national conventions. Consequently, South

Carolina Republicans had to try to survive in any way they could. They rallied black voters while trying to attract disaffected or nonaligned whites; other times they tried to fuse with one or another of the continually feuding Democratic factions. They also looked to the national government to dispense life-giving patronage. They were neither uniquely incompetent nor venal in their response to the uncompromisingly racist white society they faced.

Acknowledgments

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Chicago Historical Society; Vivian G. Harsh Collection on Afro-American History and Literature, George C. Hall Branch, Chicago Public Library; Indianapolis Public Library; Indiana Historical Society; Princeton [Indiana] Public Library; South Carolina Supreme Court; United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit; Columbia University Library; University of Chicago Library; Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston; Charleston Library Society; and Beaufort [S.C.] County Library.

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