

## General Information

### African American Legislators in Tennessee

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The first African American to be elected to the Tennessee House of Representatives after Reconstruction was civil rights lawyer and businessman Archie Walter (A. W.) Willis Jr. (D, Memphis), elected in 1964.

The first African American woman to serve in the Tennessee House of Representatives was Dorothy Lavinia Brown (D, Nashville), elected in 1966.

The second African American woman to serve in the Tennessee General Assembly (elected in 1972) was the first woman to be Speaker *pro tempore* of the House (1987-2010): Lois M. DeBerry of Memphis.

The first African Americans to serve as Tennessee State Senators are Avon N. Williams Jr. of Nashville and J. O. Patterson Jr. of Memphis, both elected in 1968.

The first African American woman to serve in the Tennessee Senate was Thelma Harper of Nashville, elected to the 96<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, which convened in January 1989.

Tennessee has sent only two African Americans to the United States Congress: Harold Eugene Ford Sr. (D, Memphis) served in the U. S. House of Representatives from 1975 to 1997; his son, Harold Ford Jr. (D, Memphis) was also a U.S. Representative, serving from 1997 to 2007. There has never been a black Senator from Tennessee.

**House Joint Resolution 32** post-ratified the 15th Amendment in 1997.

Four black legislators are the subjects of Tennessee Historical Commission markers:

- **Representative Sampson W. Keeble**
- **Representative Thomas F. Cassels**
- **Representative Samuel A. McElwee**
- Senator Avon Williams, Jr.

### African Americans in National Politics, 1870-2006

- The first African American member of the U.S. Senate was Hiram Revels from Mississippi. He was elected by the state legislature on the very day (February 23, 1870) that Mississippi was readmitted to the Union.
- The last black Senator of the 19th century was Blanche K. Bruce, also elected by the Mississippi state legislature. Bruce was the first African American to serve a full term in

the Senate. He served from 1875-1881 and was the last African American in the U.S. Senate – from any state, North or South – until 1967.

- In 1966 Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts became the first African American popularly elected to the U.S. Senate. Carole Moseley Braun of Illinois, elected in 1993, was the first black female Senator. Barack Obama, elected from Illinois in 2004, is only the third African American to be popularly elected to the Senate.
- Joseph Hayne Rainey, a former slave from South Carolina, became the first African American popularly elected to Congress when he defeated Democrat C.W. Dudley in a special election. Sworn into the Forty-first Congress on December 12, 1870, he was re-elected to the U.S. House of Representatives for four more terms, serving until 1879, by which time “Jim Crow” legislation was beginning to affect the outcome of Southern elections.
- Twenty-two African Americans from the South served in Congress during the 19th century. George Henry White, U.S. Representative from North Carolina during the years 1897-1901, was the last former slave to serve in Congress and the last African American member of the House of Representatives until the 1928 election of Oscar DePriest of Chicago. From DePriest’s election to the present day, there has always been some black representation in Congress although, before 1955, there were never more than two African Americans among the 435 House members.
- It was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – 100 years after the end of the Civil War – that state-sanctioned voter discrimination officially came to an end.