George Washington Murray Biography

George Washington Murray

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Biography

A farmer by trade, Murray led a successful career in politics and carried out a lifelong battle for voting reform in the United States. Born on September 22, 1853 near Rembert, South Carolina, Murray was the son of slaves. He went to public schools, graduated from the State Normal College at Columbia, South Carolina in 1876. He then took up farming and teaching school.

He ran unsuccessfully for the United States House of Representatives in 1890, but was elected in 1892 when he won a last-minute challenge of a discriminatory election law engineered to keep African-Americans from the ballot box. In Congress, he fought for black rights, speaking in favor of retaining Reconstruction laws which protected black voting rights, and he highlighted African-American achievements by reading into the congressional record a list of 92 patents granted to African-Americans, eight of which happened to be his own patents for agricultural implements. When Frederick Douglass died, Murray made an unsuccessful attempt to allow the anti-slavery activist's remains to lie in state at the Capitol. Murray appeared to have lost his reelection bid in 1894, but once again he challenged voting irregularities and was awarded his seat by the House Elections Committee after a two year battle. During the next two years he was forced to spend the majority of his time trying to fight off plans in South Carolina to limit the rights of African-American voters by imposing stringent residency, literacy and property requirements.

An unfavorable 1898 Supreme Court ruling on the question of poll taxes effectively destroyed Murray's ability to be reelected. After his electoral loss, he returned to farming and real estate. He died on April 21, 1920 in Chicago, Illinois.