Hiram Rhoades Revels Biography

Hiram Rhoades Revels

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Biography

Hiram Rhoades Revels (1822-1901), African American clergyman and university administrator, was the first black American to sit in the U.S. Senate.

Hiram Revels was born of free parents on Sept. 27, 1822, in Fayetteville, N.C. His early education was limited, since it was illegal in North Carolina at that time to teach African Americans, slave or free, to read or write. As soon as he was able, he moved to Union County, Ind., to further his education at a Quaker seminary. After completing his work there, he moved to Ohio to attend another seminary. Eventually he moved to Illinois and graduated from Knox College at Bloomington. In 1845 he was ordained a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Md.

As a minister, Revels served African American churches in Ohio, Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, and Tennessee. He finally settled in Baltimore, where he became minister of a church and principal of a school for blacks. When the Civil War began in 1861, he helped organize the first two regiments of black soldiers from the state of Maryland.

In 1863 Revels moved to St. Louis, established a school for African American freedmen, and recruited another regiment of black soldiers. In 1864 he joined the Federal forces in Mississippi as chaplain to an African American regiment. For a short time he was provost marshal of Vicksburg. For 2 years he worked with the Freedmen's Bureau and established several schools and churches for African Americans near Jackson and Vicksburg.

In 1866 Revels settled in Natchez, Miss. He joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1868, the year he was elected alderman. In 1870 he was elected as a Republican to fill an unexpired term in the U.S. Senate, where he served until March 1871. As a senator, he was dignified and respected; his political views, however, were somewhat conservative.

After retiring from the Senate, Revels returned to Mississippi to serve as president of Alcorn College (1871-1874). He was removed from his post for political reasons but was appointed president of Alcorn again in 1876. Following this second term, he returned to church work in Holly Springs, Miss. While attending a church conference at Aberdeen, Miss., he died on Jan. 16, 1901.