



Alonzo Jacob Ransier

1834–1882

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1873–1875
REPUBLICAN FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

South Carolina's first black lieutenant governor, Alonzo Ransier had a reputation for fighting corruption that helped him win election to the 43rd Congress (1873–1875). An observer on the House Floor described him as “a man of great courage and sagacity,” concluding, “Mr. Ransier’s political career has been a varied and powerful one, and his strong, tough, active brain makes him an effective and worthy worker in the House.”¹

Alonzo Jacob Ransier was born to free parents—likely Haitian immigrants of mulatto French background—on January 3, 1834, in Charleston, South Carolina.² As a free black child, he received a limited education before beginning work as a shipping clerk at age 16. Free African Americans were prohibited by state law from holding jobs other than those involving manual labor, and his employer was brought to trial; however, the law generally often went unenforced, and, in Ransier’s case, the judge levied a fine of only one cent plus court costs.³

Ransier’s prewar freedom provided him the financial security and prominence to establish himself quickly in postwar South Carolina politics. In 1865, the military governor of the Carolinas, General Daniel Sickles, appointed Ransier as register of elections. In October 1865, Ransier participated in a Charleston meeting of the Friends of Equal Rights and was part of a delegation charged with presenting a petition to the U.S. Congress.⁴ Ransier’s political star rose in 1868. In January, he served as a delegate from Charleston to the South Carolina constitutional convention. The following October, he took over the post of Republican state central committee chairman after Benjamin F. Randolph was assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan.⁵ The following November, he served as a South Carolina elector for President Ulysses S. Grant and was elected to the state house of representatives where he served one term.

Although he was not a dominant personality in South Carolina politics, Ransier became a well-recognized and popular leader in Charleston. In 1870, he reached what is widely considered the apex of his political career when he defeated ex-Confederate General M. C. Butler to become South Carolina’s first black lieutenant governor, under Governor Robert K. Scott.⁶ His position afforded him an opportunity to preside over the state senate as well as the Southern States Convention in Columbia in 1871. Ransier’s tenure in South Carolina’s executive government was remarkable for his honesty in a notoriously corrupt administration.⁷

In August 1872, Representative Robert De Large declined the renomination for his coastal South Carolina seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, citing poor health. Local Republicans selected Ransier to represent the district, whose population was 70 percent black.⁸ Ransier defeated Independent Republican candidate General William Gurney with 20,061 votes (75 percent) in the general election.⁹

When he was sworn in to the 43rd Congress Ransier received De Large’s assignment to the Committee on Manufactures.¹⁰ His earnest but conventional attempts to look after the interests of his coastal Carolina constituents in the House were typically ignored. He introduced measures to erect a public building in Beaufort, South Carolina, and to rebuild the war-damaged west wing of the Citadel Academy in Charleston. Ransier also requested \$100,000 to improve Charleston Harbor. However, none of these bills passed.

Representative Ransier broke from his understated legislative style to speak passionately on several occasions in 1874 during debate on the Civil Rights Bill. On February 7, Ransier delivered a speech, which was later published and distributed, asserting that African Americans’



resistance to punishing ex-Confederates demonstrated a desire for racial harmony and praising the black soldiers who fought for the Union in the Civil War. He stressed freedmen's overwhelming loyalty to the Republican Party, stating that such fidelity should be rewarded by the passage of the Civil Rights Bill. Ransier also focused on the portion of the bill calling for equal educational opportunities, discussing the advantages of integrated education, and citing mixed-race programs at Oberlin College and at Wilberforce, Harvard, and Yale Universities. Ransier believed equal rights and opportunities in education would allow talented black men to achieve a respectable position in their communities, ultimately curbing discrimination. "Let the doors of the public school house be thrown open to us alike," he declared, "if you mean to give these people equal rights at all, or to protect them in the exercise of the rights and privileges attaching to all free men and citizens of our country."¹¹ For Ransier, the legislation rose above party politics. He pleaded with opponents not to defeat the bill to spite corrupt Republican state governments: "Because some officials in [the South] have abused the public confidence and prostituted their office should violence be done to a great principle of justice and . . . a race denied therein equal rights in a government like ours? It cannot be. Let justice be done though the heavens fall."¹² When the Civil Rights Bill came to a vote in February 1875, the education clause had been eliminated. Ransier was so disappointed, he declined to vote.¹³

Upon returning to South Carolina in 1874, Ransier was outspoken about his disenchantment with the corruption in scalawag Governor Franklin Moses's administration. The governor's crimes were infamous. Having paid off

some of his personal debt with public funds and sold executive pardons to prisoners, Moses resisted arrest by calling the South Carolina militia to defend him. His well-paid allies in the state legislature saved him from impeachment, and Moses carefully placed his friends in key patronage positions to maintain his political control.¹⁴ Ransier aligned himself with a faction in the South Carolina Republican Party calling for statewide reform. Ransier's insubordination cost him the renomination for his congressional seat at the district convention. He lost the bid to Charles W. Buttz (whom Ransier accused of buying the nomination for \$4,000). Despite his break with local Republicans, Ransier supported the party ticket in November. Buttz lost the election to Independent Republican Edmund Mackey, who also opposed the Moses administration, but the seat was declared vacant in July 1876 when Buttz contested the election.¹⁵

Soon after Ransier left Congress, his wife, Louisa Ann Carroll Ransier, died giving birth to their 11th child, whom Ransier named Charles Sumner Ransier for the late Massachusetts Senator.¹⁶ Alonzo Ransier married Mary Louisa McKinlay in 1876. In an effort to provide for his large family, he secured an appointment as U.S. Internal Revenue Service collector in Charleston, despite his abhorrence of corruption and hence, political patronage. He later appealed to Governor Daniel Chamberlain for a position in the South Carolina state government when his tenure as a tax collector came to an end.¹⁷ Ransier did not receive a nomination, but worked instead as a night watchman in a customs house and as a municipal street sweeper. Lapsing into poverty by 1880, he lived in a crowded Charleston boarding house. Ransier died in obscurity on August 17, 1882, at age 48.¹⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

“Ransier, Alonzo Jacob,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000060>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

College of Charleston, Avery Research Center for African-American History & Culture (Charleston, SC). *Papers*: In the Lillian Ransier Wright Papers, 1945–1995, 0.25 linear feet. The papers contain information on Reconstruction Era African-American politicians, specifically Alonzo Jacob Ransier.

NOTES

- 1 Marie La Baron, “Colored Congressmen: How the Enfranchised Race Is Represented in Washington,” 12 April 1874, *St. Louis Daily Globe*: 3.
- 2 The names of Ransier’s parents are not known. It also is not known whether Ransier had any siblings.
- 3 William C. Hine, “Ransier, Alonzo Jacob,” *American National Biography* 18 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 151–152 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*); see also Stephen Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 297.
- 4 There is no record of the petition in the *House Journal* or the *Congressional Globe* for the 39th Congress.
- 5 For more information, see Daniel W. Hamilton, “Randolph, Benjamin Franklin,” *ANB* 18: 120–121.
- 6 Thomas Holt, “Ransier, Alonzo Jacob,” *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 511–512. Hine calls the early 1870s the “pinnacle” of Ransier’s political career; see Hine, “Ransier, Alonzo Jacob,” *ANB*.
- 7 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 101.
- 8 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 212–213.
- 9 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc., Publishers, 1998): 226.
- 10 As Ransier’s election as lieutenant governor is considered the pinnacle of his political career, there are no detailed accounts of his first bid for the U.S. House of Representatives.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (7 February 1874): 1314.
- 12 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (9 June 1874): 4786.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 2nd sess. (4 February 1875): 1011.
- 14 Christine Doyle, “Moses, Franklin J., Jr.,” *ANB* 15: 971–972.
- 15 Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of All the Contested Election Cases* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901): 320–321.
- 16 The names of Ransier’s 10 other children are not known.
- 17 Quoted in Hine, “Ransier, Alonzo Jacob,” *ANB* 18.
- 18 *Ibid.*