



Charles Edmund Nash

1844–1913

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1875–1877
REPUBLICAN FROM LOUISIANA

Although Charles E. Nash commanded less national attention than some of his Louisiana contemporaries, his status as a wounded war hero vaulted him to the House of Representatives in the 44th Congress (1875–1877). Louisiana would not elect another black Representative until the late 20th century.¹ In the Democratically controlled House, Nash encountered great difficulty gaining even the right to speak before his colleagues on the House Floor.

Charles Edmund Nash was born to free parents, Richard and Masie Cecile Nash, in Opelousas, St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, on May 23, 1844.² Nash attended common (public) schools before becoming a bricklayer in New Orleans. He married Martha Ann Wycoff. Following her death in 1884, he married a French woman, Julia Lucy Montplaisir, in 1905.³ Union troops occupied New Orleans early in the Civil War, taking the strategic port city in 1862. In July 1863, Nash enlisted as a private in Company A of the 82nd Regiment, United States Volunteers. He was eventually promoted to sergeant major. In a battle at Fort Blakely, Alabama, Nash was severely wounded and lost part of his right leg on April 9, 1865.

Though the injury limited his mobility and affected his health for the rest of his life, Nash's reputation as a hero impressed local Republicans after the war. The Republican Party was well organized and teaming with able men, most of them free mulattos who lived in New Orleans.⁴ In 1869, Nash was hired for a federal patronage position as a night inspector in the New Orleans Custom House. His combat record made him an attractive candidate for a U.S. congressional seat in 1874 for the district surrounding Baton Rouge.

Louisiana Republicans faced a precarious situation after the state was re-admitted to the Union and federal military occupation ended. In 1870, black Lieutenant Governor

Oscar Dunn split from white incumbent Governor Henry Warmoth at the Republican state convention. With Dunn seizing black support, both men laid claim to the executive office. Dueling state legislatures emerged, and the racially divided Republicans barely held sway over local politics, depending on support from the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant to fend off Democratic challengers. It was during this near-anarchy that Nash was nominated for a congressional seat.⁵ Only the presence of federal troops and the support of Louisiana blacks ensured that Nash's election to Congress in 1874 was relatively smooth.⁶ He defeated Democrat Joseph B. Moore by a little more than 1,000 votes, taking 52 percent of the vote and becoming Louisiana's first black Representative. His uneventful election contrasted sharply with that of his predecessor John Willis Menard, who was elected in 1868 but never seated, and that of P. B. S. Pinchback—one of Louisiana's most prominent black politicians—who ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. House and Senate two years later.⁷

Nash joined a record number of eight black Congressmen—including Mississippi Republican Blanche K. Bruce in the Senate—in the 44th Congress. Upon his swearing in, the substantial Democratic majority limited him to a single assignment: the Committee on Education and Labor. Nash submitted few pieces of legislation but was eager to voice his views in the House Chamber for the public record. However, the Democrats, who controlled the House Floor, were determined to deny Nash that opportunity. For example, in late May 1876—following a two-hour speech by Louisiana Republican Frank Morey—Nash attempted to express his views on a disputed election in a district just north of his. Democratic Representative John House of Tennessee cut off debate before Nash could speak. When Nash protested, Speaker Michael Kerr of Indiana offered only to print his





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speech in the *Congressional Record Appendix*. Nash rejected this offer. The presiding officer ignored Nash's repeated request to speak but subsequently permitted New York Democrat George Beebe to make a lengthy speech on the same subject.⁸

On the evening of June 7, Nash finally made a speech on the House Floor. He chastised the Democratic Party for undermining the status of freedmen and harassing whites who supported black civil rights. Nash also emphasized the importance of supporting public education, noting the discouraging condition of the common schools in the South and "the ignorance of the masses." He then called for strict enforcement of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, warning "a government which cannot protect its humblest citizens from outrage and injury is unworthy of the name and ought not to command the support of a free people."⁹ He ended on an optimistic note, reaffirming his faith that the United States could overcome its racial and political divisions. "For we are not enemies, but brethren," he declared, "America will not die.

As the time demands them great men will appear, and by their combined efforts render liberty and happiness more secure."¹⁰ It was late at night when Nash finally finished his speech.¹¹

In 1876, Nash lost his seat to Democrat Edward Robertson, who won with 58 percent of the vote to Nash's 42 percent.¹² Nash's campaign was overshadowed by the presidential electoral crisis: Louisiana and two other states sent two sets of certified electoral votes to Washington—one for Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes and the other for Democrat Samuel Tilden. As House Members discussed the crisis, Nash attempted to participate but once again was ignored.¹³ Abandoning his political career at the close of the 44th Congress, Nash returned to Louisiana to work as a bricklayer. After injuries and his age forced him to abandon the trade, he served briefly as postmaster in St. Landry Parish in 1882. Nash subsequently made his living as a cigar maker. He died in New Orleans, on June 21, 1913.



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FOR FURTHER READING

“Nash, Charles Edmund,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=N000008>.

NOTES

- 1 Representative William Jefferson of New Orleans, the next black Member from Louisiana, was sworn in on January 3, 1991. See “Jefferson, William Jennings,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress 1774–Present*, available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=J000070>.
- 2 Maurine Christopher is the only biographer who claims Nash was a slave; see Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 104. For other accounts, see Chandra Miller, “Nash, Charles Edmund,” *American National Biography* 16 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 234–235 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*); Stephen Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 267; and Thomas Holt, “Nash, Charles Edmund,” *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 471–472.
- 3 Nash had no children. See Miller, “Nash, Charles Edmund,” *ANB*.

- 4 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 105.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 6 Joe Gray Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863–1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974): 299–300.
- 7 For more information on these two men, see James Haskins, *The First Black Governor, Pinkney Benton Stewart Pinchback* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996); John Willis Menard, *Lays in Summer Lands*, ed. by Larry E. Rivers et al. (1879; reprint, Tampa, FL: University of Tampa Press, 2002).
- 8 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (31 May 1876): 3437.
- 9 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (7 June 1876): 3667–3668.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 3669.
- 11 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 107.
- 12 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 238.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 2nd sess. (15 December 1876): 236.