



Jeremiah Haralson

1846–1916

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1875–1877
REPUBLICAN FROM ALABAMA

Admired by his contemporaries as a natural politician, Jeremiah Haralson made his reputation in Alabama politics as a powerful orator and an adroit debater. Black civil rights advocate Frederick Douglass observed that Haralson spoke “with humor enough in him to supply a half dozen circus clowns.”¹ However, a Democratic majority during his single congressional term tempered his public wit; he made no speeches on the House Floor. Haralson’s unsuccessful re-election campaign in 1876 set off a series of difficult and fruitless attempts to regain his seat in the Jim Crow South, ending a political career marked by mystery and contradiction.

Jeremiah Haralson was born a slave near Columbus, Georgia, on April 1, 1846. His early life is not well documented. He was sold twice as a child before John Haralson, a lawyer from Selma, Alabama, purchased him in 1859. After winning his freedom in 1865, Jeremiah Haralson taught himself to read and write. He made his living as a farmer and may also have been a clergyman.² Haralson married Ellen Norwood in 1870 and had one son, Henry.

Throughout his career, Haralson demonstrated a natural shrewdness and a gift for politics, yet contemporaries described him as forceful, “uncompromising, irritating, and bold.”³ Haralson’s party loyalty spanned the political spectrum throughout his early career. Likely drawn to politics because of his oratorical talent, he reportedly became a Democrat in 1867—an unusual move given the Democratic Party’s affiliation with former Confederates and slaveholders. Haralson campaigned for Democratic presidential candidate Horatio Seymour in 1868, claiming his allegiance to the Democrats stemmed from loyalty to his former master and from the uncertain future of the Republican Party in the South, then dominated by carpetbaggers and former Union soldiers.⁴ However,

Haralson may have acted as a double agent. By some accounts, his speeches backing Seymour were insincere, and he used private conversations afterward to sway listeners to the Republican ticket.⁵ Despite being too young to meet the constitutional requirement to serve in the U.S. House, the ambitious Haralson made his first unsuccessful bid for Congress at age 22 in 1868.⁶ By 1869, Haralson had formally switched parties. He publicly allied himself with the Republicans, claiming that the Democrats had failed to attract the newly enfranchised freedmen.⁷ However, just one year later he successfully ran as an Independent for the state house of representatives, marking the beginning of a trend toward third-party candidacy, to which he would adhere for his entire political career. In 1870, Haralson was chosen to preside over the Republican Party’s district convention, at which Benjamin S. Turner—the first African American from Alabama to serve in Congress—was nominated.⁸ By 1872, when he was elected a Republican member of the Alabama state senate, Haralson seemed firmly in the GOP camp. After successfully navigating a civil rights bill through the state senate, his political power soared. One local newspaper observed, “He is perhaps feared more than any other colored man in the legislature in Alabama.”⁹

The Alabama Republican Party was divided along racial lines throughout the Reconstruction Era, and Haralson was no friend to white carpetbagger Republicans, who were wary of his former Democratic ties and believed he had entered politics strictly for personal gain. White Republicans in the state senate accused him of accepting bribes from railroad officials and of stealing bales of cotton.¹⁰ Haralson often played up his pure African-American heritage in his campaigns. One Alabama newspaper described him as “black as the ace of spades,” (most of his African-American opponents were mulatto).¹¹



He also stoked the racial fears of his black constituents, noting in 1872 that if Grant were not re-elected, African Americans would be exterminated in a southern race war.¹² In 1874, Haralson won the Republican nomination in the district formerly represented by Representative Turner, which stretched over a swath of western Alabama including Haralson's hometown of Selma and a large chunk of central Alabama "black belt." The district's population was about 50 percent black.¹³ Haralson campaigned on a strong civil rights platform, appealing to the district's abundant freedmen. White Republicans and Democrats alike rallied behind incumbent liberal Republican Frederick Bromberg, who had taken advantage of a divided black electorate to defeat Turner and another black candidate two years earlier. Haralson captured 54 percent of the vote to claim victory in the general election.¹⁴

Bromberg contested Haralson's victory. In delivering the decision of the Committee on Elections on April 18, 1876, Democratic Chairman John Harris of Virginia informed his colleagues that their investigation uncovered "frauds as flagrant and abuses as violent as ever have been committed in this country upon the elective franchise."¹⁵ Harris flailed the district's Republicans for controlling voters with money appropriated for helping freedmen, noting that more "colored voters were intimidated by their own race against voting for [Bromberg]," than were hassled by white supremacists. The committee declared some of Haralson's votes invalid, but the black Representative retained a secure margin over Bromberg. The committee ruled unanimously to reject Bromberg's challenge, a decision sustained by the House.¹⁶ Haralson received a single assignment: to the Committee on Public Expenditures.

Radical Republicans from Haralson's district frowned on his friendships with former Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and southern Democratic Senators Lucius Q. C. Lamar of Mississippi and John Gordon of Georgia. Haralson rebuffed Radical Republican scorn by accusing white members of his own party of conspiring against African-American voters. "We must drive out these hell hounds and go in for peace between the two races in the

South," he noted in a January 29, 1876, statement.¹⁷ As the contentious 1876 election promised violence in the South, he broke with the Republican Party by criticizing the use of federal soldiers to police polls and ensure orderly voting. Haralson claimed their presence would hurt the Republican Party, telling a southern Democratic newspaper "every blue jacket sent to the South makes Democratic votes."¹⁸ During his term, he introduced legislation to use the proceeds from the sale of public land for education, although he favored strict segregation of the races, particularly in public schools. He also presented a petition from citizens in Mobile, Alabama, requesting compensation for the use of a medical college and supplies by officers of the Freedmen's Bureau. None of the bills proposed by Haralson passed.

By 1876, the Alabama state legislature had gerrymandered Haralson's district—cutting it nearly in half—so that it encompassed only the west-central Alabama "black belt." The new district had by far the largest black electorate—65 percent—of any district in the state. Yet, despite this advantage, Haralson spent nearly a decade attempting to win back his seat. Former black Representative James Rapier, who had recently purchased a plantation in the newly reconfigured district to avoid running in his former, black-minority district, challenged Haralson in the 1876 primary. When Rapier won, the outraged Haralson entered the general election as an Independent. Haralson and Rapier split the substantial Republican ticket, emerging with 34 and 28 percent of the vote, respectively. Democrat Charles M. Shelley—a former Confederate general, the Selma sheriff, and a stalwart of the local Democratic Party—won the election with a 38 percent plurality.¹⁹ This loss in such a strong Republican district was a blow to the state Republican Party.²⁰ Haralson determinedly contested the election, claiming Shelley had unfairly selected the inspectors at the polling places. As sheriff, Shelley had assigned illiterate black men as Republican inspectors, putting them at the mercy of their literate white Democratic counterparts. After inspectors threw out many of his votes, Haralson argued

that there had been plenty of literate black Republicans available to work as inspectors. In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, he wrote, “Mr. Shelley is no more entitled to the seat in the Forty-fifth Congress than the Sultan of Turkey, and is only here by taking advantage of his own wrong.”²¹ Haralson submitted his official complaint to the Committee on Elections on April 16, 1878, but the committee never reported back on the issue.²²

Haralson returned to win the Republican nomination for his former seat in 1878. The *Chicago Daily Tribune*, a newspaper favoring Haralson, noted that racial prejudices in the district were so extreme, white Democrats preferred “to see the Devil himself in Congress rather than Haralson.”²³ Shelley’s re-election campaign looked promising after a third candidate, white Independent Republican Jonathan Henry, entered the race.²⁴ Though Henry took only 2 percent of the electorate, Haralson failed to defeat Shelley for a seat in the 46th Congress (1879–1881); Shelley took 55 percent to Haralson’s 43 percent.²⁵ Haralson believed several thousand of his votes were thrown out for no apparent reason and contested the election, but the *Tribune* reported he could not find a local judge who would take affidavits from his witnesses. When Haralson was finally able to procure a judge, Shelley supporters jailed his witnesses and attempted to have Haralson and his lawyer imprisoned under false charges. Moreover, while traveling between Montgomery and Selma, Alabama, Haralson was attacked by an armed mob and ordered to leave the state.²⁶ Fearing for his life, he fled to the District of Columbia.²⁷ Haralson stated his case in the contested election in a memorial introduced on the House Floor, to be printed by Republican Representative J. Warren Keifer of Ohio—a Union veteran, a member of the Committee on Elections, and

a future Speaker of the House.²⁸ A debate ensued as to the necessity of making a special request to print the memorial, since petitions and memorials were routinely reproduced on the House Floor. Opponents disliked the special attention the letter was receiving; they feared it would be printed in the *Congressional Record* and accessible to the public.²⁹ The House referred the memorial to the Committee on Elections, which printed it but never ruled on Haralson’s claim.³⁰

After six years Haralson revived his campaign for a central Alabama district. He spent the intervening years in patronage positions, first as a clerk at Baltimore’s federal customs house and later as a clerk at the Department of the Interior. He also worked for the Pension Bureau in Washington, DC, from 1882 to 1884. Having failed to receive his party’s nomination in 1884, Haralson ran once again as an Independent Republican. He came away with just 683 votes in a four-way contest, even though the district’s population was 80 percent black.³¹ Democrat Alexander Davidson easily won the election with 14,225 votes (64 percent), garnering twice as many votes as his nearest competitor, Republican George Craig.³² The lopsided results—relative to the number of registered voters in each party and the racial makeup of the district—led Republican newspapers to question the returns, but there is no record that Haralson officially contested the election.³³

After Haralson’s final bid for Congress, he lived in Louisiana and Arkansas before returning to Selma, Alabama, in 1912. Haralson later wandered through Texas and Oklahoma, finally settling in Colorado, where he became a coal miner. In 1916, he was killed by a wild animal while hunting near Denver. No death certificate was ever filed.³⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

“Haralson, Jeremiah,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000179>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Alabama Department of Archives and History

(Montgomery, AL) *Papers*: In the Reconstruction Era Political Materials, 1868–1878, 0.33 cubic feet. Authors include Jeremiah Haralson.

University of Alabama Libraries, W. S. Hoole Special Collections Library (Tuscaloosa, AL) *Papers*: 1876, one item. A letter from Jeremiah Haralson to the United States Centennial Commission in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, written on April 27, 1876. In the letter, Haralson requests an invitation for his wife to the opening of the Centennial International Exhibition of Industry.

NOTES

- 1 Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 95.
- 2 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 132; Stephen Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 115.
- 3 Quoted in Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 132.
- 4 Loren Schwenger and Alston Fitts III, “Haralson, Jeremiah,” *American National Biography* 10 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 37–38 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 5 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 132.
- 6 Bruce A. Ragsdale and Joel D. Treese, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1989* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990): 63; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 132; Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction*: 166. Article I, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution states that no one under the age of 25 may be seated in the U.S. House of Representatives. Michael Dubin makes no mention of Haralson's candidacy for the 1868 general election; it is likely that Haralson never received the party nomination. See Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 213.
- 7 Schwenger and Fitts, “Haralson, Jeremiah,” *ANB*.
- 8 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 132–133.
- 9 Haralson's civil rights bill was subsequently abandoned by the state house of representatives. See Schwenger and Fitts, “Haralson, Jeremiah,” *ANB*. Quoted in Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 134, and Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction*: 116.
- 10 Schwenger and Fitts, “Haralson, Jeremiah,” *ANB*.
- 11 Quoted in Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*: 95, and Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction*: 116.



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- 12 Schweningen and Fitts, "Haralson, Jeremiah," *ANB*.
- 13 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 146.
- 14 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 230.
- 15 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (18 April 1876): 2552.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (23 March 1876): 1913; *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (18 April 1876): 2552; Chester H. Rowell, *A Historical and Legal Digest of All the Contested Election Cases* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1901): 303.
- 17 Quoted in Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction*: 117.
- 18 Quoted in Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 135.
- 19 According to Loren Schweningen's biography of Representative James Rapier, Haralson withdrew from the race before the election. However, Haralson appears in the election results and split the Republican ticket with Rapier. See Loren Schweningen, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 236.
- 20 Schweningen, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 157.
- 21 "Jere Haralson's Case: The Colored Statesman Puts a Few Points to the Public," 10 April 1878, *Washington Post*: 2.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 45th Cong., 2nd sess. (16 April 1878): 2580. This case is not included in Rowell's *A Historical and Legal Digest of All the Contested Election Cases*. There has been considerable discussion among scholars as to the outcome of Haralson's contested election to the 45th Congress (1877–1879). Some sources indicate that the Committee on Elections ruled for Haralson in the 45th Congress but that Congress adjourned before he was seated. See Schweningen and Fitts, "Haralson, Jeremiah," *ANB*; Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*: 94. Others confirm that the committee ruled for seating Representative Charles Shelley. See Ragsdale and Treese, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1989*: 64. Contemporary accounts, however, suggest the committee never considered or ruled on Haralson's claim; see, for instance, "Wasting Time In Congress," 14 May 1878, *New York Times*: 1. The most likely result of Haralson's election contest can be inferred from congressional sources: The *Congressional Record* notes that Haralson's claim was reported to the Committee on Elections, but there is no mention of a decision. *The Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present* confirms that Representative Charles Shelley was elected fairly to the 45th Congress; see "Shelley, Charles Miller," available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=S000326>. Finally, Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 236, contains no mention of a successful challenge to Shelley's seat in the 45th Congress.
- 23 "Alabama," 14 October 1878, *Chicago Tribune*: 2.
- 24 "Independents in Alabama," 3 November 1878, *New York Times*: 1.
- 25 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 243.
- 26 "Washington," 6 June 1876, *New York Times*: 5.
- 27 "How a Southern Republican Was Cheated Out of His Seat," 2 February 1880, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 4.
- 28 *Congressional Record*, House, 46th Cong., 2nd sess. (31 January 1880): 633; "Keifer, Joseph Warren," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=K000048>.
- 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 46th Cong., 2nd sess. (31 January 1880): 634.
- 30 The case does not appear in Rowell's, *A Historical and Legal Digest of All the Contested Election Cases*; see also *Congressional Record Index*, 46th Congress, three sessions.
- 31 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990): 3.
- 32 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 264.
- 33 See *Congressional Record Index*, 49th Congress, both sessions.
- 34 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 136.