



John Roy Lynch

1847–1939

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1873–1877; 1882–1883
REPUBLICAN FROM MISSISSIPPI

The only African-American Representative from Mississippi for a century, following a quick rise in politics at a young age, John Roy Lynch fought to maintain Republican hegemony in his state in the face of violent Democratic opposition. A veteran of the Civil War and, later, the Spanish–American War, Lynch emphasized his rights as an American citizen on the House Floor. “It is certainly known by southern as well as northern men that the colored people of this country are thoroughly American,” he declared. “Born and raised upon American soil and under the influence of American institutions; not American citizens by adoption, but by birth.”¹ An outspoken advocate for the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 and an active Republican throughout his long life, Lynch later challenged a major school of interpretation that disparaged black political activity during the Reconstruction Era.

John Roy Lynch was born into slavery near Vidalia, Louisiana, on September 10, 1847. His Irish immigrant father, Patrick Lynch, managed the Tacony Plantation, and his mother, Catherine White, was a mulatto slave. He had two older brothers, William and Edward. John Lynch became the personal valet of his owner, Mississippian Alfred W. Davis, until Davis was drafted by the Confederate Army in 1862. Lynch recalled Davis as “reasonable, fair, and considerate.”² After being emancipated at the end of the war, Lynch worked as a cook for the 49th Illinois Volunteers regiment and performed other odd jobs. He subsequently managed a photographer’s studio. Lynch’s business prospered, and he invested in local real estate.

Lynch rose rapidly in politics because of the opportunities that were available to black men in Reconstruction-Era Mississippi. He began his political career in 1868 by speaking at the local Republican club in favor of a new Mississippi constitution. The following

year, he served as an assistant secretary at the Republican state convention. In April 1869, the local Republican Party selected Lynch to advise Reconstruction Governor Adelbert Ames about various candidates for political positions in Natchez, Mississippi. When the list of appointments was unveiled, Lynch professed to be surprised to find he had been appointed justice of the peace. The local favorite for the appointment, Reverend H. P. Jacobs, accused Lynch of stealing the position.³ In November 1869, Lynch won his first elected office, serving in the Mississippi state house of representatives. In January 1872, colleagues selected the 24-year-old as speaker.

Lynch sought a U.S. House seat representing coastal Mississippi, a district that he largely created as presiding officer in the state house of representatives. The district encompassed the southern quarter of the state, including his Natchez home. Lynch enjoyed broad support from his district, whose population was 55 percent black.⁴ He defeated incumbent Republican Legrand Perce for the nomination, noting his vulnerability to Democratic accusations that he was a carpetbagger. Facing Democratic Judge Hiram Cassidy in the general election, Lynch conducted a strong campaign organized by a trio of influential black politicians: William McCary, Robert Wood, and Robert Fitzhugh. In a quiet election in which both candidates canvassed the state and engaged in joint debates, Lynch defeated Cassidy, taking 15,091 votes (65 percent).⁵ When the 43rd Congress (1873–1875) convened, 26-year-old John Lynch was its youngest Member.⁶ He received appointments to the Committee on Mines and the Committee on Expenditures in the Interior Department.

Like other African Americans in Congress, Lynch enthusiastically promoted the Civil Rights Bill, which outlawed discrimination on public transportation and in



public accommodations and provided for equal education for the races.⁷ Speaking twice before his colleagues on an issue that preoccupied much of the 43rd Congress, Lynch argued that civil rights legislation would help Black Americans achieve political independence, and claimed Democratic opposition to the bill forced freedmen to support the Republican Party. Despite Democrats' tactical attempts to prevent him from speaking, Lynch addressed his colleagues on February 3, 1875, just before the Civil Rights Bill came to a vote. Maintaining that the legislation would not force blacks and whites to mix socially, as southern Democrats feared, Lynch said, "It is not social rights that we desire. We have enough of that already. What we ask for is protection in the enjoyment of public rights—rights that are or should be accorded to every citizen alike."⁸ The legislation that came to a final vote on February 4, 1875, was severely weakened by amendments, but Lynch was among the majority supporting the bill.

Lynch returned home to a crisis in Mississippi in the spring of 1875. Democrats sought to seize power by implementing their Mississippi Plan, which involved using economic coercion and violence to exclude black voters and Republican politicians at the state level. Governor Ames asked for federal troops to keep the peace but was rebuffed by the administration of President Ulysses S. Grant. Beginning his campaign for re-election, Lynch was doubtful he would retain his seat in the face of formidable Democratic opposition. Though he was supported by loyal members of his party, many white Republicans who had supported him in 1872 became Democrats in 1874.⁹ Facing Democratic candidate Roderick Seal, Lynch traveled throughout his district, despite the threat of being physically attacked by white supremacists.¹⁰ In a violent, confused campaign, he narrowly defended his seat, taking 13,746 votes (51 percent).¹¹ Lynch was the only Republican in the Mississippi House delegation to survive a Democratic sweep in the polls. Retaining his assignment on the Committee on Mines and Mining, Lynch took his seat in the 44th Congress (1875–1877).

Although a record eight African-American Members

(including Senator Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi) took the oath of office in December 1875, the Democratic Party controlled the House for the first time since before the Civil War.¹² Lynch spent the remainder of his second term defending Congressional Reconstruction in the South. Throughout 1876, he attacked the violent practices of White Leaguers and pleaded for political parties in the South to cease dividing along racial lines. He called the White League "an organization which has been brought into existence by the bad men of the Democratic Party for the purpose of securing position by the power of the bullet and not by the power of the ballot."¹³ Lynch's pleas fell on deaf ears approaching the 1876 election. Traveling home to Mississippi to seek re-election, Lynch faced a hostile campaign against Democrat James R. Chalmers, a former Confederate general and cavalry commander. Having restored a majority in the state legislature, Democrats reconfigured Lynch's district to their advantage. His new district, called the "shoestring district" because it narrowly hugged the Mississippi River, was the only Republican-dominated district. The new boundaries squeezed the majority of the state's GOP voters into one district, almost guaranteeing a Democratic Mississippi delegation.¹⁴ Having secured the Republican nomination without opposition, Lynch made his trademark canvass of the new district. Although he was able to prevent violent riots, which were common in other parts of the state, his stump speeches were often interrupted by jeers and groans from the crowd. Lynch characterized this activity as "harmless" compared with the "riot and bloodshed which had been contemplated."¹⁵ Chalmers defeated Lynch, taking 15,788 votes. Lynch garnered only 12,386 votes (44 percent) and contested the election.¹⁶ The Committee on Elections, dominated by Democrats, who controlled the House, refused to hear his case.

After leaving Congress, Lynch remained active in the Mississippi Republican Party, working with Senator Bruce to maintain party unity in the face of dwindling federal support. However, in 1880, Lynch's interest in national politics was renewed when his former House

colleague James Garfield of Ohio ran for President on the Republican ticket. Seeking a seat in the “shoestring district,” Lynch gained the support of his old allies and, with the blessing and support of Senator Bruce, barely won the nomination in a four-way race.¹⁷ Riding the statewide strength of the Democratic Party, Chalmers defeated Lynch with 63 percent of the vote, garnering 9,172 votes to Lynch’s 5,393.¹⁸ Lynch contested the election. When his case came before the Committee on Elections on April 27, 1882, Lynch argued that in five counties, more than 5,000 of his votes had been counted for Chalmers. He further asserted that several thousand Republican ballots had been thrown out after a secret hearing because of technicalities such as a clerical failure to send a list of names with the returns and the presence of unusual marks on the ballots.¹⁹ Lynch’s strongest arguments were based on Chalmers’s remarks that Lynch’s votes had been thrown out and that he (Chalmers) was “in favor of using every means short of violence to preserve [for] intelligent white people of Mississippi supreme control of political affairs.”²⁰ The committee ruled in Lynch’s favor, and on April 29, 1882, the House voted 125 to 83 to seat him; 62 Members abstained. He received positions on the Committee on Education and Labor and the Committee on the Militia.

The legislative agenda of the 47th Congress (1881–1883), unlike Reconstruction-Era Congresses, focused on internal improvements and tariff legislation instead of on conditions in the South and freed slaves. Arriving late in the first session, Lynch concentrated on economic legislation favoring his Mississippi constituents; he requested funds to reimburse an orphanage in Natchez that was damaged in the Civil War, sought appropriations to improve the shoreline of the Mississippi River, and split the state into two judicial districts. On a national level, Lynch submitted legislation to reimburse depositors who lost money when the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company failed. His colleagues on the Education and Labor Committee reported favorably on the bill, but it died in the House Rules Committee. He also sought appropriations for a National Board of Health, citing

devastation from the 1878 yellow fever epidemic that swept through the South. Based on personal experience, Lynch also appealed to the House to revise the statute limiting reimbursement for losses incurred contesting an election, believing a \$2,000 cap would deter all but the wealthy candidates.

Lynch faced Democrat Henry S. Van Eaton, a local judge, for re-election in 1882. A skilled debater aided by the Natchez newspapers’ harsh treatment of Lynch during the campaign, Van Eaton defeated Lynch 7,615 votes (53 percent) to 6,706. John Lynch made two more unsuccessful bids for Congress. In 1884, Van Eaton defeated Lynch with 60 percent of the vote. Lynch later lost to Democrat Thomas Stockdale in 1886, polling less than a third of the vote.²¹

After his congressional career, Lynch returned to Mississippi to oversee his real estate, but remained active in politics. He served as a Mississippi member of the Republican National Committee from 1884 to 1889. In 1884, he was a delegate to the Republican National Convention. Lynch served as a temporary chairman and was accorded the honor of delivering a keynote address, making him the only African American to deliver a keynote address at a national political convention until 1968.²² He returned to the Republican National Convention in 1900 to serve on the committee on platform and resolutions. On December 18, 1884, Lynch married Ella Wickham Somerville, a Creole mulatto woman from a prominent southern family. The couple had one daughter (her name is not known). Lynch was admitted to the Mississippi bar and opened a Washington, DC, law office in 1897, practicing for one year. In 1897, the William McKinley administration appointed him a major in the U.S. Army and paymaster of volunteers in the Spanish–American War. After divorcing his wife in 1900, Lynch spent three years in Cuba. His orders subsequently took him to San Francisco, Hawaii, and the Philippines. Lynch retired as a major in 1911. Upon his return, he married Cora Williamson, and the couple moved to Chicago, where Lynch practiced law.

In reaction to negative literature on the Reconstruction Era, Lynch published *The Facts of Reconstruction* in 1913. In 1917 and 1918, he published two articles in the *Journal of Negro History* challenging historian James Rhodes's attack on Republican governments during the postwar era. The articles were published in 1922 in the book *Some Historical Errors of James Ford Rhodes*. During the 1930s, Lynch began writing his autobiography, *Reminiscences of an Active Life*, which was published in 1970. He was editing the manuscript when he died at age 92 on November 2, 1939, in Chicago.

FOR FURTHER READING

Franklin, John Hope. "John Roy Lynch: Republican Stalwart from Mississippi," in Howard Rabinowitz, ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

"Lynch, John Roy," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=L000533>.

Lynch, John Roy. *The Facts of Reconstruction* (New York: Arno Press, reprint 1968).

_____. *The Late Election in Mississippi* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1877).

_____. *Reminiscences of an Active Life*, edited and with an introduction by John Hope Franklin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

_____. *Some Historical Errors of James Ford Rhodes* (Boston: The Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Duke University, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library (Durham, NC) *Papers*: In the George Gifford Papers, 1860–1920, 546 items. Subjects include John Roy Lynch.

Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, DC) *Microfilm*: In the Robert H. Terrell Papers, ca. 1870–1925, four microfilm reels. Correspondents include John R. Lynch. A finding aid is available in the library. *Microfilm*: In the Carter G. Woodson Collection of Negro Papers and Related Documents, ca. 1803–1936, 10 microfilm reels. Subjects include John Roy Lynch.

Mississippi Department of Archives and History (Jackson, MS) *Papers*: 1873–1877, four items. The papers of John Roy Lynch include a manuscript of his autobiography, a photograph, and three letters.

The Morgan Library, Department of Literary and Historical Manuscripts (New York, NY) *Papers*: 1873, one item. A letter from Adelbert Ames to George H. Williams, Attorney General, written on April 16, 1873. In the letter, Adelbert Ames recommends John Roy Lynch as U.S. Marshal for the Southern District of Mississippi.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 2nd sess. (12 August 1876): 5540–5543.
- 2 Lynch became Davis’s slave in a roundabout way. Having purchased his family just before his death in April 1849, Patrick Lynch willed them to family friend, William Deal, requesting that they be treated as free people. Deal ignored the request and sold the Lynches to Davis in Natchez, Mississippi. Davis, who also purchased Tacony Plantation, learned of the family’s misfortune and allowed Catherine Lynch to hire out her time while looking after his Mississippi home. See John Roy Lynch, *Reminiscences of an Active Life: The Autobiography of John Roy Lynch*, edited with an introduction by John Hope Franklin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970): 23.
- 3 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 56.
- 4 Kenneth Martis, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress: 1789–1989* (New York: Macmillan, 1989): 126–127; Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 184–185.
- 5 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 224.
- 6 Lynch remains the youngest African American to date to serve in Congress. Though the 43rd Congress did not convene until December 1, 1873 (after John Lynch’s 26th birthday), Lynch’s term of service officially commenced on March 3, 1873 (while Lynch was still 25). Harold Ford, Jr. of Tennessee was also 26 when he was elected and sworn in to Congress on January 3, 1997.
- 7 John Hope Franklin, “John Roy Lynch: Republican Stalwart from Mississippi,” Howard Rabinowitz ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982): 46.
- 8 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 2nd sess. (3 February 1875): 943–947.
- 9 Franklin, “John Roy Lynch: Republican Stalwart From Mississippi”: 46.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 11 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 234.
- 12 Office of the Clerk, “Party Divisions,” available at http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/partyDiv.html.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (15 June 1876): 3824–3825.
- 14 Franklin, “John Roy Lynch: Republican Stalwart from Mississippi”: 47.
- 15 Lynch, *Reminiscences of an Active Life*: 185–186.
- 16 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 238.
- 17 Lynch, *Reminiscences of an Active Life*: 217–219, 223.
- 18 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 252.
- 19 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 63.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 47th Cong., 1st sess. (27 April 1882): 3376–3394.
- 21 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 259, 267, 274.
- 22 Mississippi Senator Blanche K. Bruce was the first African American to preside over a national political convention (at the 1880 Republican Convention); see Thura Mack, “John Roy Lynch,” in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 145.