



John Adams Hyman 1840–1891

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1875–1877
REPUBLICAN FROM NORTH CAROLINA

While in bondage, John Adams Hyman repeatedly broke laws prohibiting his education so he could learn to read and write, and as a result, was sold at least eight times. After his emancipation, Hyman sought with equal determination to become the first black U.S. Representative from North Carolina. Though the shy legislator made no speeches on the House Floor, a letter to Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, written in 1872, demonstrated his eloquence. “If [an African American] is a man,” Hyman declared, “he is entitled to *all* the rights and privileges of any other man. There can be no grades of citizenship under the American flag.”¹

Born into slavery near Warrenton, North Carolina, on July 23, 1840, John Adams Hyman is believed to have been a child of Jesse Hyman, a slave.² Starting in his early twenties, John Hyman was a janitor for a Warrenton jeweler. Hyman later noted that he was treated like “chattel, bought and sold as a brute.”³ When he gained his freedom in March 1865, Hyman returned to Warrenton, where he became a farmer and opened a country store. He also became a trustee of the first public school in his area. Hyman married and had two sons and two daughters. The names of his immediate family members are not known.⁴

Upon his return, Hyman became active in the movement to secure political rights for North Carolina blacks. At age 26, he served on two committees at the state’s Freedmen’s Convention, including the committee on invitations, an important panel whose purpose was to encourage the attendance of influential politicians and to raise awareness about the convention.⁵ Hyman also served as a delegate to the March 1867 Republican State Convention, and as the registrar for northern Warren County, recruiting emancipated voters. In November 1867, Hyman was elected to the Warren County delegation to the North Carolina constitutional convention, which

met in Raleigh the following January. Hyman was one of 15 black delegates in the 133-member body. In 1868, he won election to the state senate where he served for six years. From this seat, Hyman wrote U.S. Senator Charles Sumner in support of his Civil Rights Bill.⁶ He also opposed President Andrew Johnson’s leniency toward ex-Confederates and strongly advocated requiring states to ratify the 14th Amendment before being readmitted to the Union. Hyman voted against impeaching Republican Governor William Holden in 1872 for ordering the arrest of Ku Klux Klan members suspected of lynching and terrorizing the state’s black population. In the senate, which was divided over how to resuscitate North Carolina’s postwar economy, Hyman deflected Conservatives’ and Democrats’ charges that he accepted bribes from railroad lobbyists. Most members of the penitentiary committee, on which Hyman served, were caught up in this scandal.⁷

Hyman’s hometown of Warrenton was in the northern section of the “Black Second” district, the only safe Republican district after gerrymandering by the Democratically controlled North Carolina legislature. The “Black Second” stretched from Warren County, adjacent to the Virginia border, and hooked around to coastal Craven County.⁸ The earliest reliable census, taken in 1880, showed that the populations of three of the district’s 10 counties were more than two-thirds black. All the counties in the district had populations that were at least 45 percent black. In 1872, white Republican Charles R. Thomas, a pre-Civil War Whig, sought a third congressional term in the reapportioned district, but newly powerful African-American politicians in the “Black Second” demanded that a freedman run for Congress. Hyman challenged Thomas for the nomination—embittering many white Republicans and opening racial fissures in the party—but lost at the May 1872 district convention. However, black



voters remained loyal to the party of the emancipators, and Thomas handily defeated his Democratic opponent in the general election.

Yet Thomas's term in the 43rd Congress (1873–1875) was minimally successful and marred by political blunders. Seven candidates, including Hyman and African-American state representative James O'Hara, challenged the weakened incumbent at the 1874 district convention.⁹ The early ballots taken at the convention saw the votes split evenly among the candidates—each county cast one vote for its favored contender—but after a series of negotiations among the candidates, Hyman prevailed on the 29th ballot. Realizing their redistricting efforts had opened the door for North Carolina's first black Representative, white supremacist Democrats frantically sought a viable last-minute challenger. The success of their candidate, George W. Blount, depended on the chance that ever-growing racial divisions in the Republican Party would prevent white Republicans from voting for Hyman.¹⁰ Opposition newspapers emphasized that Hyman lacked the support of white Republican leaders, as evidenced by the candidacy of white Independent Republican Garland White. The Democratic press also spread the rumor that white Republicans were bribing Hyman not to run.¹¹ Yet Hyman emerged victorious, taking 62 percent of the vote.¹² Blount contested Hyman's election. His chief complaint was that the phrase "Republican Congressional Ticket" at the top of Hyman ballots persuaded many voters who were barely literate to vote for him.¹³ On August 1, 1876, a Democratic House unanimously agreed that Hyman was entitled to the seat.¹⁴

Upon his arrival for the 44th Congress (1875–1877), Hyman was assigned to the Committee on Manufactures. For the first time in nearly two decades, the Republicans found themselves in the minority, and Hyman's committee assignment had little significance for his agricultural district. A quiet man who preferred behind-the-scenes politics, Hyman made no speeches on the House Floor. Instead, he submitted private bills and petitions on behalf of the poor in his district and state.¹⁵ He

sponsored a bill authorizing the Treasury Department to build a lighthouse at Gull Rock on North Carolina's Pamlico Sound and introduced legislation to compensate constituents for financial losses incurred during the Civil War. He joined others from the North Carolina delegation in seeking relief for Cherokee Indians resettled in the West. A loyal Republican, he cast a noteworthy "nay" vote against restricting President Ulysses S. Grant to two terms. (Though a formal term limit for Presidents did not yet exist, the resolution determined that a chief executive should step down after two terms based on the precedent established by President George Washington.) Hyman was one of only 18 dissenting Members, as many Republicans defected.¹⁶ Hyman attempted to protect his black constituents by introducing a bill to reimburse the depositors of the failed Freedmen's Bank, but it never made it out of committee.

As racial divisions widened in the state's Republican Party, former North Carolina Reconstruction Governor Curtis Brogden began mustering support to defeat Hyman for the Republican nomination in the spring of 1876. By the following July, Brogden's supporters were so confident he would be nominated, many did not attend the district convention, though Brogden himself arrived at the convention site several days early.¹⁷ Brogden's small but powerful force convinced some of Hyman's lieutenants—white and black—of Brogden's superiority, and the former governor won on the ninth and deciding ballot.¹⁸ Deflecting rumors he would run as a third-party candidate, Hyman threw his support behind his rival. Winning the general election by a wide margin, Brogden took his place as the only Republican in the state's new congressional delegation.¹⁹

Hyman returned to his farm in Warrenton, where he also ran a grocery and liquor store. He briefly served as a special deputy internal revenue collector for the Rutherford B. Hayes administration, but political pressure from the North Carolina Republican Party kept him from fully assuming his post.²⁰ In 1878, he again ran for Congress, losing the nomination to James O'Hara. Hyman served



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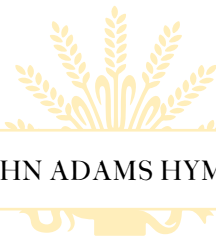
as a steward and Sunday school superintendent for the Warrenton Colored Methodist Church. As the temperance movement took hold in North Carolina, he was expelled from the church on charges of selling alcoholic beverages and embezzling Sunday school funds. Hyman left Warrenton, moving to Washington, DC, and later to Richmond, Virginia. In 1887, he returned to Warrenton with renewed political ambitions, but he failed to obtain a congressional nomination in 1888. The winner, black candidate Henry Cheatham, eventually reclaimed the “Black Second.” Shortly thereafter, Hyman defected from the Republican Party after agreeing to encourage blacks to vote for district Democrats in exchange for minor political posts.²¹ Returning north, Hyman worked as a mail clerk’s assistant in Maryland for 10 years before moving back to Washington, DC, in 1889, where he took a position in the Department of Agriculture’s seed dispensary.²² John Hyman died at home of a stroke on September 14, 1891.

FOR FURTHER READING

Anderson, Eric. *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872–1901* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

“Hyman, John Adams,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H001025>.

Reid, George W. “Four in Black: North Carolina’s Black Congressmen, 1874–1901,” *The Journal of Negro History* 64 (Summer 1979): 229–243.



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NOTES

- 1 John Hyman to Charles Sumner, 24 January 1872. Charles Sumner Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (emphasis Hyman's).
- 2 Hyman's parentage has never been confirmed, and it is unclear whether his presumed parent, Jesse Hyman, was his mother or his father. See George W. Reid, "Four in Black: North Carolina's Black Congressmen, 1874–1901," *Journal of Negro History* 64 (Summer 1979): 229.
- 3 Hyman to Sumner, 24 January 1872. Sumner Papers.
- 4 The only record of Hyman's family is in his obituary, which does not mention his wife's and children's names. See "Years of Service Ended," 16 September 1891, *Washington Post*: 8.
- 5 Debi Hamlin, "Hyman, John Adams," *American National Biography* 11 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 617–618 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 6 Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 113.
- 7 Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872–1901* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981): 37, 43. According to Anderson, Hyman claimed to know nothing about the bribes and was never officially charged with a crime.
- 8 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 4; Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 201.
- 9 O'Hara eventually won election to the "Black Second" district in 1882.
- 10 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 39.
- 11 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 150.
- 12 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 232. White's name does not appear in the election results.
- 13 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 44.
- 14 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (1 August 1876): 5051.
- 15 Stephen Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 123.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (15 December 1875): 228. The 22nd Amendment, ratified in 1951, restricted Presidents to two terms.
- 17 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 151.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 52.
- 20 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 152; Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 144. Other sources indicate Hyman obtained the appointment but was later removed because of political pressure. See Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*: 113.
- 21 Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*: 113.
- 22 It is unclear where Hyman served in Maryland since most sources include only the state (Middleton, *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction*: 123; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 152; Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers*: 113; Reid, "Four in Black": 230). *ANB* places him in Washington, DC, lending credence to the possibility that his post was near the capital. See Hamlin, "Hyman, John Adams," *ANB*.



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