



## *George Washington Murray*

### *1853–1926*

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1893–1895; 1896–1897  
REPUBLICAN FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

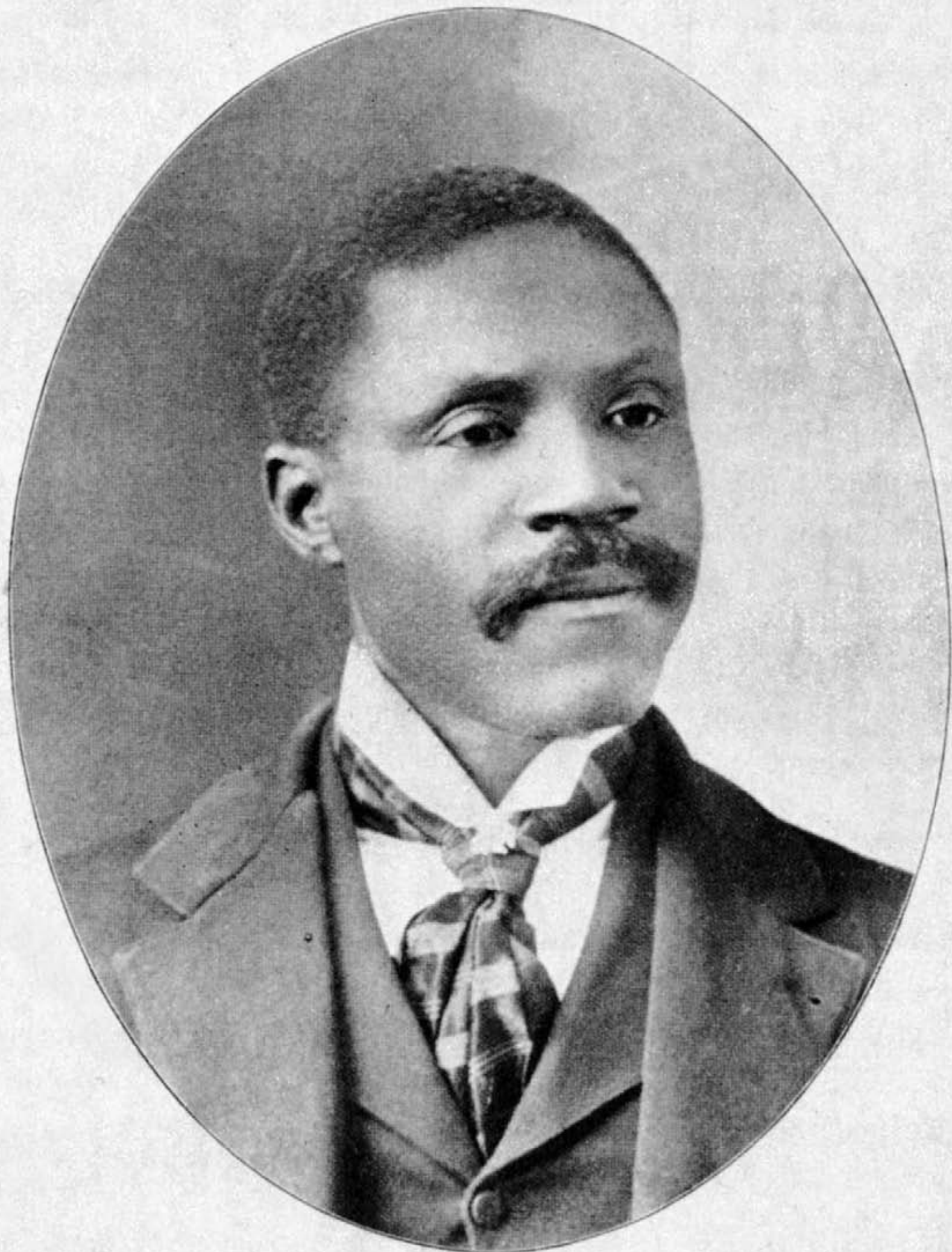
A former slave, Representative George Murray was the only black Member in the 53rd and 54th Congresses (1893–1897). Murray was highly regarded by his peers because of his position. An 1893 newspaper called him “the most intellectual negro in the [Sumter] county.”<sup>1</sup> However, Murray’s detractors doubted his eloquence, accusing him of hiring a ghostwriter for his floor speeches. Employing his formidable oratorical skills, Murray fought the disfranchisement laws that beset the South in the early 1890s. He was a political pragmatist who worked for his constituents while placating the hostile political base necessary for his election campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Unable to defeat the overwhelming tide of white supremacy, either nationally or at home, Murray left the House, marking the end of black representation in South Carolina for nearly 100 years.<sup>3</sup>

George Washington Murray was born on September 22, 1853, near Rembert, in Sumter County, South Carolina. His parents, whose names are not known, were slaves and died before the end of the Civil War; however, Murray had at least two brothers, Prince and Frank. Murray never received a formal primary education, but in 1874 he entered the University of South Carolina in Columbia after it was opened to black students by the Republican state government.<sup>4</sup> After federal withdrawal from the South following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, Murray and the other black students were forced out of the university. He eventually graduated from the nearby State Normal Institution. Murray married Ella Reynolds in 1877, and they had two children, Edward and Pearl. Murray also had an illegitimate son, William, who was born sometime in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup>

Working as a farmer, a teacher, and a lecturer in Sumter County, Murray obtained eight patents for various farming tools.<sup>6</sup> His farming success garnered him local recognition, and his selection as the Sumter County delegate to the

1880 Republican Party state convention sparked his interest in politics. Murray’s support of Republican President Benjamin Harrison during the 1888 campaign won him a patronage appointment as customs inspector at the port of Charleston in February 1890. That same year he sought the nomination for the South Carolina “shoestring district,” which included sections of Charleston and Georgetown on the coast and twisted narrowly to the northeast to include central portions of the state.<sup>7</sup> Two black Representatives had been elected in the district: Civil War hero Robert Smalls and incumbent Thomas Miller. Miller defeated Murray for the Republican nomination but eventually lost the seat to Democrat William Elliott.

In 1892, Murray ran again for the congressional seat. Conducting a campaign that emphasized his African roots (his opponent, Thomas Miller, was light-skinned), Murray defeated Miller and white candidate E. W. Brayton to capture the Republican nomination.<sup>8</sup> Though the “shoestring district” had been modified slightly by reapportionment, nearly 75 percent of the population was black.<sup>9</sup> During the general election, especially in areas outside Charleston, precinct workers rejected votes for Murray for insignificant reasons, for example, the candidate’s ballots were one-eighth or three-sixteenths of an inch too short, the ballot boxes were not opened at the appointed time, or the precinct managers failed to record the name of the precinct before sending the election returns to Columbia.<sup>10</sup> However, Murray’s chances were strengthened by divisions within the district’s Democratic Party. Governor Benjamin Tillman, who led a statewide white supremacy political machine, found himself at odds with the district’s Democratic candidate, E. M. Moise. Moise disagreed with the governor in rejecting Populist economic issues such as the coinage of silver, which emerged as a national issue during the 1892 election. The





★ GEORGE WASHINGTON MURRAY ★

primarily agricultural residents of the “shoestring district,” who had been hit hard by economic depression, supported free silver coinage as a form of debt relief. The complicated political atmosphere made for a close election. Though Moise was originally declared the winner, canvassers for the state board of election (Democratic supporters of Governor Tillman) exacted revenge on their party’s maverick by confirming that Murray was victorious by 40 votes.<sup>11</sup> He received an assignment to the Committee on Education, but most of Murray’s work in Congress was outside the jurisdiction of this committee.

Murray’s position as the only black Member during his two terms in Congress defined his career. One of the first things he did after arriving in Washington was to visit newly inaugurated Democratic President Grover Cleveland. In a personal meeting with the President, Murray told Cleveland that southern blacks were concerned about their welfare under a Democratic President but that the new administration had a fresh opportunity to welcome African Americans into the Democratic Party. Murray asked Cleveland to consider appointing more blacks to political offices through patronage, but neither the President nor his congressional allies prioritized building political capital among black Americans.<sup>12</sup>

When a financial panic gripped the country in early 1893, President Cleveland blamed much of the economic instability on the 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act. He sought to repeal the law, which required the federal government to trade 4.5 million ounces of silver bullion each month in exchange for legal tender. Cleveland called a special session of Congress to deal with the crisis. During this session, Murray and other supporters joined the 12 Populists and Silverites in defending the Silver Purchase Act. Speaking on the House Floor on August 24, 1893, Murray argued that most of his constituents earned little and were disadvantaged by the diminishing supply of gold. Believing continued silver coinage would help to stabilize the economy in his district, Murray noted that his constituents traced their overwhelming poverty to “the circulating medium [gold], which like a viper with its

victim in its coils, has been drawing its cords tighter and tighter around their prosperity, until it is dead. I am of the opinion that the only sure and permanent remedy is a lengthening of the cords, an enlargement of the volume of money.”<sup>13</sup> Although Murray spoke at 10 p.m.—the last time slot of the legislative day—a large crowd gathered in the gallery to hear his maiden speech.<sup>14</sup> Proponents of silver coinage were unable to secure the necessary votes and, despite an 80-day filibuster by Senate Silverites, President Cleveland secured the congressional repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act on November 1, 1893.

In 1893, when Representative Henry Tucker of Virginia authored a bill to remove impartial election supervisors and federal marshals from southern polling places, Murray fearlessly sought to block the legislation.<sup>15</sup> On several occasions, he interrupted Tucker’s allies on the House Floor, citing personal experiences of discrimination.<sup>16</sup> On October 2, 1893, Murray interrupted freshman Representative (and future Speaker) Beauchamp (Champ) Clark of Missouri, who was insisting that state officials adequately monitored polling places. Murray noted that these officials were often prejudiced appointees of white supremacist Democratic state governments. He also refuted Clark’s claim that federal Republican officials coerced black voters into voting as one bloc. Three days later, Murray made a long speech against Representative Tucker’s legislation. He ended by repeating his plea to President Cleveland: “While I can not persuade myself that there can be found here and in the Senate enough cruel and wicked men to make this law effective, still if I am disappointed in that . . . I hope that the broad-souled and philanthropic man occupying the Executive chair is too brave and humane to join in this cowardly onslaught to strike down the walls impaling the last vestige of liberty to a helpless class of people.”<sup>17</sup> A long thunderous bout of applause from the Republican side of the chamber followed Murray’s speech, which earned him the epithet the “Black Eagle of Sumter.”<sup>18</sup> Though Murray was absent on October 10 when the Tucker legislation came to a vote, he called upon black voters to study the roll call vote and



defeat any Member who voted in its favor in the next election.<sup>19</sup> The bill passed both chambers and was signed into law by President Cleveland in February 1894.<sup>20</sup>

In 1894, Murray faced an uphill battle for re-election to the 54th Congress. The South Carolina legislature dissolved the “shoestring district,” cutting off much of Charleston and Murray’s black voting base.<sup>21</sup> Democratic infighting ceased when former Representative William Elliott won the Democratic nomination. Elliott emerged with 60 percent of the vote in the general election, but several precincts reported instances of fraud.<sup>22</sup> Murray appealed to the state board of election canvassers, but they rejected his claim.

As a result, Murray spent the third session of the 53rd Congress (1893–1895) preparing to contest Elliott’s election before the House. He submitted a massive amount of testimony indicating election fraud; the paperwork was reported to be nearly a foot thick.<sup>23</sup> Murray’s evidence revealed that ballot boxes in three of four heavily Republican counties in his new district were never opened, that black voters were issued fraudulent registration certificates or paperwork was withheld entirely, and that precincts in black regions failed to open. Witnesses also reported that William Elliott himself stood in front of ballot boxes taunting black men and preventing them from submitting their votes. The worst fraud occurred in the small portion of southern Charleston that remained in Murray’s district. A precinct compromising 2,000 more registered black voters than white declared 2,811 votes for Elliott and 397 for Murray.<sup>24</sup> After reviewing the testimony, the House Committee on Elections—composed of a strong Republican majority—concluded that the final victory belonged to Murray by 434 votes. The whole House first took up the case late in the first session of the 54th Congress on June 3, 1896. Democrats spent several hours trying to prove that South Carolina registration laws had been explained to black voters and that Murray was not favored by all African-American voters and thus could not claim the district’s majority based on his race.<sup>25</sup> The next

day, the House voted to seat Murray, 153 to 33. With only seven days remaining in the first session, Murray was again assigned to the Committee on Education and was also appointed to the Committee on Expenditures in the Treasury Department.

Political trouble at home prevented Murray from attending the final two sessions of the 54th Congress. In 1895, Tillman Democrats in the state legislature passed a referendum to revise the 1868 state constitution. Murray tried to organize black voters to elect sympathetic delegates to the constitutional convention, but only six black delegates were sent, including former Representatives Robert Smalls and Thomas Miller. The results were disastrous for black South Carolina voters. The primarily white, Democratic convention created new requirements for proving residency, instituted poll taxes, established property requirements, and created literacy tests—all aimed at disfranchising black voters.<sup>26</sup> Murray and fellow Republicans asked Governor Tillman to call a special session of the state legislature in March 1896. The governor ignored the appeal. In July 1896, Murray and others authored the address “To the People of the United States,” requesting national support for federal intervention in the South Carolina elections. Murray spent most of 1896 raising money to pay legal fees for challenges to the new registration laws in federal courts, vowing that fighting “lawfully, not unlawfully . . . we shall create such conditions that the United States is bound to take a hand.”<sup>27</sup> Murray’s optimistic prediction fell short. Legal action brought a poll tax case before the Supreme Court in 1895 in *Mills v. Green*, but the court ruled that the tax did not violate the 14th Amendment. The same ruling on a similar case brought before the high court—*Williams v. Mississippi* in 1898—nearly halted the legal battle against disfranchisement laws and virtually sealed off national elected office for African Americans in the South.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the new provisions for voting registration dimmed Murray’s chances for re-election in 1896; Elliott easily defeated him, with 67 percent of the vote.<sup>29</sup>



★ GEORGE WASHINGTON MURRAY ★

Returning to Congress as a lame duck in February 1897, Murray announced he would object to South Carolina's nine electoral votes in the presidential election—which went to Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan—if Congress did not investigate the state's new election laws. He submitted a petition signed by hundreds of South Carolina Republicans, alleging that more than 100,000 eligible black men had been refused the vote in the 1896 election. Influential Republicans attempted to dissuade Murray, fearful that disrupting the electoral vote count would impede Republican William McKinley's apparent victory. Murray dropped his objection but not his call for a federal investigation. He submitted a resolution requesting an investigation. However, Congress adjourned in March, ignoring his request.<sup>30</sup>

After leaving Congress, Murray returned to his South Carolina farm. He invested in more land, which he sold to black tenant farmers. In 1905, Murray was convicted in a circuit court for forgery related to a contract dispute between two of his tenants.<sup>31</sup> Murray fled to Chicago to avoid the sentence of three years' hard labor, insisting he

had received an unfair sentence because of his race.<sup>32</sup> Ella Murray was unwilling to leave South Carolina, and the two divorced. Murray married Cornelia Martin in 1908 and gained a stepdaughter, Gaynell. The Murrays adopted a 10-year-old boy, Donald, in the 1920s and parented numerous foster children.<sup>33</sup>

Murray became active in the Republican Party in Chicago. His distrust of local Democrats eventually led him to request that the House investigate the powerful Cook County Democratic political machine. He also tried a number of unsuccessful business ventures.<sup>34</sup> Late in his life, Murray lectured across the country. He compiled many of his speeches into two books on race relations: *Race Ideals: Effects, Cause and Remedy for Afro-American Race Troubles* (1914) and *Light in Dark Places* (1925).<sup>35</sup> Both books posited that discrimination would persist until Americans appreciated the worth and dignity of African Americans. Following Murray's death on April 21, 1926, his longtime Chicago neighbor, former Mississippi Representative John Roy Lynch delivered his eulogy.



## FOR FURTHER READING

Gaboury, William J. "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina," *Journal of Negro History* 62 (July 1977): 258–269.

Marszalek, John F. *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow: South Carolina's George Washington Murray* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006).

"Murray, George Washington," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M001106>.

Murray, George Washington. *Light in Dark Places* (Chicago: Light in Dark Places Pub. Co., 1925).

\_\_\_\_\_. *Race Ideals: Effects, Cause and Remedy for Afro-American Race Troubles* (Princeton, IN: Smith & Sons Publishing, 1914).

## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

**University of Illinois Press** (Champaign, IL) *Papers*: In the Booker T. Washington Papers, 1889–1895, one volume. Correspondents include George Washington Murray. For more information, visit <http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/Vol.3/html/451.html>.

**University of South Carolina** (Columbia, SC) South Caroliniana Library. *Papers*: In the J. Mitchell Reames Papers, 1907–1990, 12.5 linear feet. Correspondents include George Washington Murray.

## NOTES

- 1 Quoted from the Baltimore-based newspaper *Afro-American* (20 April 1893) in William J. Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina," *Journal of Negro History* 62 (July 1977): 259; John F. Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow: South Carolina's George Washington Murray* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006): 67.
- 2 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 118–119.
- 3 Representative James Clyburn, who took his seat in the 103rd Congress in 1993, was the next African-American Representative from South Carolina. Clyburn is related to Murray; see "Clyburn, James Enos," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000537>.
- 4 Previous editions of *Black Americans in Congress* indicate Murray attended public schools, but most other sources indicate he was self-taught prior to entering college. See Bruce A. Ragsdale and Joel D. Treese, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1989* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990): 97; Stephen Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 245.
- 5 Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 9, 157–158.
- 6 Middleton, *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction*: 245.
- 7 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990): 143.
- 8 The *New York Times* once reported that "judging by [Murray's] face, there is not a drop of white blood running in his veins." See, "The Debate in the House," 25 August 1893, *New York Times*: 8.
- 9 Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913*: 278–279; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 37.



- 10 Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina": 260.
- 11 Thomas Holt, "Murray, George Washington," *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 465; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 47–50.
- 12 Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 51. For anecdotal information about Murray's life as the only black Representative in the 53rd Congress, see pages 52–53, 63–65.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 53rd Cong., 1st sess. (24 August 1893): 858.
- 14 Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina," 260–261; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 57–58.
- 15 For more information on Tucker's bill, see *Congressional Record*, House, 53rd Cong., 1st sess. (10 October 1893): 107.
- 16 Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 60–63.
- 17 *Congressional Record*, House, 53rd Cong., 1st sess. (5 October 1893): 2161.
- 18 Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina": 259.
- 19 Murray frequently sought leaves of absence in both terms of Congress, often citing personal illness or sick family members; see *Congressional Record*, Index, 53rd Cong.; *Congressional Record*, Index, 54th Cong.
- 20 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 120. Christopher notes that the legislation passed both Houses. However, Representative Tucker's original bill, H.R. 2331, passed the House but was tabled in the Senate (see *Congressional Record*, Index, 53rd Cong., 1st sess.). A substitute bill passed the Senate.
- 21 Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913*: 278–279; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 68, 75–81.
- 22 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 310.
- 23 Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina": 266; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 121; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 79.
- 24 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 121.
- 25 *Congressional Record*, House, 54th Cong., 1st sess. (3 June 1896): 6072–6077, A445–452; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 101. Marszalek asserts the debate took place on June 5.
- 26 For details on the 1895 South Carolina constitutional convention, see J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974): 145–152.
- 27 Quoted in Stephen Kantrowitz, *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 208.
- 28 Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina": 263–267.
- 29 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 327.
- 30 Gaboury, "George Washington Murray and the Fight for Political Democracy in South Carolina": 266; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 107–108.
- 31 Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 132–136, provides a detailed description of the trial.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 142–143. Marszalek argues that the Murray trial exemplified the practice of "legal whitecapping, a way to rid the community of a troublesome black."
- 33 *Ibid.*, 145–146, 157–158.
- 34 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 122; Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 144–145.
- 35 Marszalek, *A Black Congressman in the Age of Jim Crow*: 146–151.



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