



Benjamin Sterling Turner

1825–1894

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1871–1873
REPUBLICAN FROM ALABAMA

A former slave and a self-made businessman who lost property during the Civil War, Benjamin Turner focused on restoring peace and repairing economic damage in the war-ravaged South. The first African-American Representative from Alabama, Turner tirelessly promoted the industriousness of his black constituents. “These people have struggled longer and labored harder, and have made more of the raw material than any people in the world,” he noted on the House Floor. “Since they have been free they have not slackened in their industry, but materially improved their economy.”¹ Turner also struck a conciliatory tone with white constituents, seeking restored political rights for former Confederates before Congress passed laws declaring general amnesty. His political moderation limited his legislative influence in an institution still controlled by Radical Republicans.

Benjamin Sterling Turner was born a slave on March 17, 1825, in Weldon, North Carolina.² His widowed owner, Elizabeth Turner, moved to Selma, Alabama, in 1830, taking five-year-old Turner to live with her on the Alabama River. Turner obtained an education, most likely sitting in as a playmate on lessons for the family’s white children. He was sold at age 20 to Major W. H. Gee, the husband of Elizabeth Turner’s stepdaughter. Gee owned a hotel and a livery stable and permitted Turner to manage the businesses and keep part of the profits. Major Gee’s brother, James, inherited Turner upon his brother’s death, and Turner managed James Gee’s hotel. Turner married a black woman, but a white man purchased her as his mistress. Turner never remarried, but the 1870 Census indicates he cared for a nine-year-old mulatto boy named Osceola.³

By the time the Civil War broke out, Turner had enough money to purchase some property. He also looked after his owner’s land and businesses when Gee left to serve in the Confederate Army. Selma became a hub for weapons

manufacturing and was overrun by the Union cavalry in the spring of 1865. The troops burned two-thirds of the city and, along with his white neighbors, Turner suffered great financial loss. He later sought \$8,000 in damages from the Southern Claims Commission, but it is unclear if he received it.⁴ Turner continued to work as a merchant and a farmer after the war, replenishing much of his capital. Eager to provide freedmen with the opportunities an education had provided him, he founded a school in Selma in 1865. In 1867, he attended the Republican state convention and attracted the attention of local GOP officials. That same year he was appointed Dallas County tax collector. In 1869, Turner was elected a Selma councilman, but he resigned in protest after being offered compensation because he believed public officials should not be paid when economic conditions were poor.⁵

In 1870, Turner made a bid for a southwestern Alabama seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Claiming he sold a horse to finance his campaign, Turner noted the lack of support from the numerous white carpetbagger Republicans, who supported more-radical, redemptive candidates. Yet Turner had strong support from the black population, which constituted nearly 52 percent of the district—the second-largest black voting bloc in Alabama.⁶ Running on a balanced platform of “Universal Suffrage and Universal Amnesty,” he defeated Democrat Samuel J. Cummings with 18,226 votes (58 percent) in the November 8 election, taking his seat in the 42nd Congress (1871–1873).⁷

Having witnessed firsthand the devastation of the Civil War, Turner spent much of his congressional career seeking financial aid for his broken southern state. In one instance, he introduced a bill to eliminate legal and political disabilities imposed on former Confederates. Though the Radical Republicans in the 42nd Congress





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denied his request, the 43rd Congress (1873–1875) eventually passed an Amnesty Act, clearing most former Confederates' political restrictions. Turner's charity toward former slave masters did not prevent him from taking a more radical stance on other legislation concerning the injustices of slavery. He advocated racially mixed schools and financial reparation for former slaves; years later, both issues remained controversial.

Turner sought to repair the devastation in his hometown by sponsoring a bill to appropriate \$200,000 for the construction of a federal building in Selma and the reconstruction of Selma's St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Continuing his call for amnesty, he claimed that the federal money would help heal wounds from the war. Turner included a plea for the federal reconstruction money in the *Congressional Globe Appendix*—a tactic he often relied upon because Republican leaders denied him time to speak on the floor. "The Government made a display in that unfortunate city of its mighty power and conquered a gallant and high-toned people. They may have sinned wonderfully, but they suffered terribly," Turner wrote on behalf of the Selma appropriation.⁸ Although that bill was not passed, Turner was able to help individual Alabamians from his position on the Committee on Invalid Pensions. Turner passed two private pension bills, one of which put a black Civil War veteran on the pension roll at \$8 per month.⁹

On February 20, 1872, Turner presented a petition from the Mobile board of trade requesting a refund of the taxes on cotton collected from the southern states from 1866 to 1868. On May 31, he submitted a speech to the *Congressional Globe Appendix*, declaring the tax unconstitutional and decrying its effect on the impoverished cotton workers—a disproportionate number of whom were freedmen. He pleaded "on behalf of the poor people of the South, regardless of caste or color, because this tax had its blighting influence. It cut the jugular vein of our financial system, bled it near unto death. . . . It so crippled every trade and industry that our

suffering has been greater under its influence than under that of the war."¹⁰ In the same speech, Turner called for the government to purchase private land, divide it into tracts of no more than 160 acres, and sell it to freedmen. No action was taken on this proposal, nor did the House consider a refund for the cotton tax.

In 1872, Republicans renominated Turner for his congressional seat, but his popularity had eroded in his Selma district. Turner's relative conservatism, his refusal to make patronage appointments on a partisan basis, and his failure to pass economic revitalization bills roiled voters.¹¹ Turner's decline also reflected class tensions among local blacks. Prominent African-American leaders noted condescendingly that during his industrious but modest past Turner had been a "barroom owner, livery stable keeper, and a man destitute of education."¹² The black elite—fearing Turner would embarrass them because, they claimed, he lacked the social graces, manners, and experience of the upper class—backed Philip Joseph, a freeborn newspaper editor. Joseph ran as an Independent, splitting the black vote. White candidate Frederick G. Bromberg, running on the Democratic and Liberal Republican ticket, benefited from the split African-American vote, winning the general election with a 44 percent plurality. Turner took 37 percent, and Joseph garnered 19 percent.¹³

After his congressional career, Turner curtailed his political activities, emerging in 1880 to attend the Alabama Labor Union Convention and to serve as a delegate to the Republican National Convention in Chicago. He then returned to his livery stable in Selma. Turner eventually lost his business during a national economic downturn at the end of the 1870s. Resorting to making his living as a farmer, Benjamin Turner died nearly penniless in Selma on March 21, 1894.



FOR FURTHER READING

“Turner, Benjamin Sterling,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=T000414>.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 42nd Cong., 2nd sess. (30 May 1872): A530–531.
- 2 Turner’s parents’ names are not known.
- 3 William W. Rogers, “Turner, Benjamin Sterling,” *American National Biography* 22 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 9–11 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 4 Rogers, “Turner, Benjamin Sterling,” *ANB*.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 93–94.
- 7 Rogers, “Turner, Benjamin Sterling,” *ANB*. See also Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 217.
- 8 *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 42nd Cong., 2nd sess. (30 May 1872): A530–531.
- 9 Private bills are bills introduced on behalf of an individual, typically a constituent.
- 10 *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 42nd Cong., 2nd sess. (31 May 1872): A540–541.
- 11 Rogers, “Turner, Benjamin Sterling,” *ANB*.
- 12 Quoted in Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 215.
- 13 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 223.