

Blanche Kelso Bruce

(1841-1898)

Born into slavery in 1841, Blanche Kelso Bruce became the first African American to serve a full term in the U.S. Senate, as well as the first African American to preside over the Senate. One of 11 children, Bruce was born near Farmville, Virginia, and was taken to Mississippi and Missouri by his owner. Just 20 years old when the Civil War began, Bruce tried to enlist in the Union army. At that time, the army did not accept black recruits, so instead Bruce turned to teaching; he later organized the first school in Missouri for African Americans. He briefly attended college in Ohio but left to work as a porter on a riverboat. In 1869 Bruce moved to Mississippi to become a cotton planter. Active in Mississippi Republican politics, he served as supervisor of elections, tax assessor, sheriff, superintendent of education, and sergeant at arms of the state senate. In 1874 the Mississippi legislature elected him to the U.S. Senate where he served until 1881.

In the Senate, Bruce was a member of the committees on Pensions, Manufactures, and Education and Labor. He chaired the Committee on River Improvements and the Select Committee to Investigate the Freedman's Savings and Trust Company. He supported desegregation of the army, protection of African American voting rights, and more humane treatment of Native Americans. Bruce encouraged increasing the disposition of western land grants to African Americans. On February 14, 1879, Bruce became the first African American to preside over the Senate.

Bruce worked devotedly to gain rights for African Americans. After leaving the Senate, he was appointed registrar of the U.S. Treasury by President James Garfield. At the Republican convention of 1888, Bruce received 11 votes for vice president. He was appointed recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia and later was a member of the board of trustees of Howard University. Bruce died in Washington, D.C., in 1898.

In an effort to enhance the collection with portraits of women and minorities who served the U.S. Senate with distinction, the Senate Commission on Art approved the commissioning of portraits of Blanche Kelso Bruce and Margaret Chase Smith (p. 338) in October 1999. Senator Christopher Dodd, chairman of the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration and a member of the Senate Commission on Art, proposed the acquisition of Senator Bruce's portrait, with the strong support of Majority Leader Tom Daschle and Republican Leader Trent Lott, also members of the commission. An advisory board of historians and curators was established to review the artists' submissions and provide recommendations to the Senate Commission on Art. Washington, D.C., artist Simmie Knox was selected in 2000 to paint Bruce's portrait. With few images of Bruce existing, Knox relied on a Mathew Brady photograph of the senator. The portrait, completed in 2001, was unveiled in the Senate wing of the Capitol at ceremonies held in September the following year.

A graduate of the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, Knox taught art at various colleges, universities, and public schools while continuing his painting career. Initially an abstract artist, he has concentrated on portraiture in recent years. Knox has painted politicians, judges, religious and civic leaders, educators, athletes, and entertainers. He feels a strong commitment to commemorate individuals who have changed the course of our history, including Frederick Douglass, educator Mary McLeod Bethune, voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King,

Jr. "Without these people, I don't think I'd probably be sitting here. They have made life a little better for all of us," he once said. Other notable portraits by the artist include those of Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Thurgood Marshall, and the official portrait of President William Jefferson Clinton in the White House collection.



This 19th-century photograph by Mathew Brady is one of only a few original images that exists of Blanche Kelso Bruce.

(Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

Blanche Kelso Bruce

Simmie Lee Knox (born 1935)

Oil on canvas, 2001

45¾ x 40 inches (116.2 x 101.6 cm)

Signed and dated (lower left corner): Simmie Knox / 2001~

Commissioned by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 2000

Accepted by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 2001

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