

Jesse R. Nichols

Government Documents Clerk and Librarian
Senate Committee on Finance, 1937-1971

Preface

by Donald A. Ritchie

Jesse R. Nichols was the first African American hired as a clerical staff member of the United States Senate, where he worked from 1937 to 1971. Black men and women had long taken part in the activities on Capitol Hill. Black laborers had helped to build the Capitol building and continued to maintain it. They served as messengers, groundskeepers, carpenters, cafeteria workers, and in similar service capacities, but were long excluded from the clerical staff.

In the 1870s, after the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which granted voting rights to black Americans, two African Americans, [Hiram Revels](#) and [Blanche K. Bruce](#) had served as senators, and a number of black men were elected to the House of Representatives. However, there were no black representatives between 1901 and 1929, nor any black senators between 1881 and 1967. During this period, the city of Washington grew largely segregated, and while Congress never adopted official segregation rules, a de facto segregation spilled over into the Capitol. During the early years of the twentieth century, doorkeepers ushered black visitors to the "colored gallery" in the Senate chamber. Cafeterias and restaurants in the Capitol and office buildings, although staffed by black cooks and waiters, barred blacks from eating there. Not until the 1960s did the racial barriers begin to tumble.

Jesse R. Nichols was born on June 14, 1909, in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Since there was no secondary school for black students, his parents sent him to live with grandparents in Oklahoma, and later to attend Alcorn high school and college in Mississippi. In 1930 he enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., intending to pursue a career in medicine. The Depression interrupted those plans. Nichols worked in a Washington delicatessen before taking a job with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In 1937 Mississippi Senator [Pat Harrison](#) put him on the staff of the Senate Finance Committee, where Nichols worked with Felton "Skeeter" Johnston, a white native of Clarksdale, who later became Secretary for the Majority (from 1945 to 1955) and Secretary of the Senate (from 1955 to 1965). At a time when the regular staff of the Finance Committee numbered only three, Nichols created the position of document clerk-librarian, handling the committee's vast collection of tax codes, hearings, witness statements, and assorted publications. He set up the committee for each meeting, whether public or executive session, providing the senators with paperwork and capsule information on each witness. For three decades he worked with the senators, staff, press, and lobbyists, providing the committee records that they sought.

In 1949 and 1950, the black journalist Alice A. Dunnigan published a series of articles on the black staff at the Capitol, which appeared in *Service* magazine published by Tuskegee Institute. In these articles she observed:

Because finance plays such an important part in the activities of any individual or organization including the United States Government, we decided to take a look into the Senate Finance Committee, which is housed in the Senate Office Building.

Here we found Jesse R. Nichols serving as document clerk and librarian.

Nichols is the first Negro ever to be appointed to a clerical position in the Senate. In 1936, he was appointed to messenger service in this committee by Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi, and was elevated about six months later to assistant clerk of this committee. He has charge of all documents and publications connected with the Finance Committee.

He is now the oldest employee, from the standpoint of service, on the committee having served under three different chairmen: Senators Harrison, [George Millikin](#) and now George again.

Nichols is a native of Mississippi, but came to Washington some nineteen years ago to enter school at Howard University. During the depression years he dropped out of school and took a job with RFC, where he worked for nearly four years before being appointed to this position.

He said his experience with this committee had been outstanding. His life has been enriched by the contacts which he has had with outstanding men and great orators.

In 1967, on the occasion of his thirtieth anniversary on the Senate staff, several members of the Finance Committee, led by Delaware Republican [John J. Williams](#), rose in the Senate chamber to pay tribute to Jesse Nichols, who, said Senator Williams, had worked under a series of influential committee chairmen, and who had "earned the respect of those former giants of the Senate, each of whom was proud to call him a friend." Senator Williams added that "it is refreshing to meet a man who throughout the years has served the Senate and his country with but one thought in mind; and that is, to do his job to the best of his ability, always remembering that as a Government employee he is a servant of the people."

Senator [Russell Long](#), then chairman of the Finance Committee, warmly concurred. "Jesse Nichols is really one of God's best people," said Senator Long. "He works any hours that may be required, does anything requested of him to the best of his ability, serves everyone with courtesy and provides any assistance he

can, without complaint about long hours or inconvenient times." Senate Republican Leader [Everett Dirksen](#) added his endorsement, testifying to Jesse Nichols' "diligence, devotion, and to his capacity, competence, and public service." Senator Dirksen concluded by noting that "30 years of faithful and devoted service certainly deserves to be taken account of in the proceedings of this body. I salute Jesse Nichols for his devotion."

About the Interviewer: Donald A. Ritchie is associate historian of the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of C.C.N.Y., he received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Maryland. He has published articles on American political history and oral history, including "Oral History in the Federal Government," which appeared in the *Journal of American History*. His books include *James M. Landis: Dean of the Regulators* (Harvard Press, 1980), *The U.S. Constitution* (Chelsea House, 1989), *History of a Free Nation* (Glencoe, 1991), and *Press Gallery: Congress and the Washington Correspondents* (Harvard, 1991). He also edits the *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee* (Historical Series) (Government Printing Office). A former president of both the Oral History Association and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region (OHMAR), he received OHMAR's Forrest C. Pogue Award for distinguished contributions to the field of oral history.

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