

“THE FIFTEENTH AMENDMENT IN FLESH AND BLOOD”: THE SYMBOLIC GENERATION OF BLACK AMERICANS IN CONGRESS, 1870–1887



RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL: Grades 7 to 12



OVERVIEW

This activity is designed to accompany the contextual essay “The Fifteenth Amendment in Flesh and Blood’: The Symbolic Generation of Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1887,” from the *Black Americans in Congress* website, history.house.gov/exhibitions-and-publications/baic/black-americans-in-congress/. Students have the opportunity to learn more about the Black Americans who served in Congress from 1870 to 1887. Students are encouraged to analyze the role African-American Representatives and Senators played in Congress during this era, as well as the ways in which they may have changed the institution.



CURRICULUM CONNECTION

- U.S. History, American Government, Social Studies, African-American Studies
- Civil War, Reconstruction, Slavery, Civil Rights



OBJECTIVES

1. Students should be able to identify the African Americans who served in Congress from 1870 to 1887.
2. Students should be able to recognize the ways in which African Americans won national elective office from 1870 to 1887.
3. Students should be able to identify important issues and trends surrounding the African Americans who served in Congress from 1870 to 1887.



LESSON PLAN

1. To help introduce students to the upcoming activity, lead a brief discussion using the questions below:
 - a. What were some of the important issues and events in America from 1870 to 1887?
 - b. If asked to describe an average Member of Congress (House or Senate) during this time period, how would you answer?
 - c. Have there been many Black Americans who have served in Congress? (Ask students to compile a quick list.)
2. Ask students to read the contextual essay “The Fifteenth Amendment in Flesh and Blood’: The Symbolic Generation of Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1887,” either independently or in groups. Encourage students to take notes and to write down any unanswered questions they encounter during the reading.
3. Once students have completed the reading, have them answer the **Comprehension Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
4. Next have students answer the **Critical Thinking Questions**. Review the answers as a class.
5. Choose one of the options listed under the category **Main Exercise** (Cooperative or Hypothetical). If necessary, students can use the online resources listed at the end of the activity to complete the **Main Exercise**.
6. Time permitting, conduct one of the **Suggested Extended Activities**.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS ON THE SURFACE

1. Who was the first Black American to serve in Congress? When did he serve? Why is he not considered the first black man elected to Congress?
2. Who was the first Black American elected to the House of Representatives? When did he serve?
3. What were some of the similar backgrounds shared by black Members? On a whole, how did the African-American Congressmen of this era differ from the average black citizen?
4. What are contested elections? Did contested elections help or hinder African Americans seeking congressional seats? Explain your answer.
5. What were some of the major legislative issues affecting black Members during this era? Describe one issue on which black Members disagreed.
6. Describe the arguments both for and against passing the 1875 Civil Rights Bill. What factors affected the bill's passage? What compromises were made to pass the legislation?



CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS DIGGING DEEPER

1. Describe the different factions within the Republican Party during the Reconstruction Era. How did African-American Members balance these factions? Provide two specific examples.
2. What effect did slavery have on the lives of the early black Members of Congress? Provide two examples of the effects of slavery for Members who had been enslaved. Trace the lives of one Member who was born into slavery and one who was born free. How did their experiences help or hinder their political careers?
3. List the names of the black Members elected from South Carolina from 1870 through 1886. Why were there so many more black Members from South Carolina than from any other state?
4. Many people assumed that Black Americans elected to Congress would hold similar beliefs and values—in other words, they would vote as a bloc. Did the African-American Congressmen of the era prove or disprove this theory? Explain your answer.
5. Senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi was introduced on his post-congressional speaking tours as “the Fifteenth Amendment in flesh and blood.” What is the meaning of this statement? How did African-American Members fill this role?



MAIN EXERCISE OPTION 1: COOPERATIVE

Working in small groups, choose a black Member of Congress from this era and follow the directions below:

- a. Read the profile for your Member.
- b. Write down any important notes.
- c. Scenario: You have been assigned the task of designing a museum exhibit to describe the life of Congressman _____. The exhibit should include information on all aspects of his life, but should focus on the Member's congressional service.

What should be included:

- Original title of exhibit that helps explain his legacy
- 50-word exhibit label that summarizes his congressional career
- Three artifacts chosen by you that best represent the Member's legacy
- A creative teaching tool for museum visitors that covers the highlights of his career in Congress (committees, key legislation, state or district he represented, etc.)

OPTION 2: HYPOTHETICAL

1. You are a black candidate for Congress from coastal South Carolina, in the 1870s, running against a Confederate veteran in a rural district with a slight black majority (55 percent). You were born free and have experience as a newspaper editor and store owner. How will you get elected? What is your campaign slogan? What are the local and national issues on which you will campaign?
2. You are a black Congressman serving on the Committee on Education and Labor in the early 1870s. You are sponsoring a bill calling for the federal funding of mixed race schools in the South. However, opponents of the bill will pass it only if a \$1 poll tax would be included in order to supplement the funding. Will you accept the compromise? Write a one-page editorial to submit to your hometown newspaper defending your position.
3. You are a black Congressman in the early 1870s who has been asked by the congressional leadership to make a five-minute floor speech in which you must defend the role of black voters and officeholders in your state government. Draft a speech and deliver it to your class.

**SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES**

1. Design a timeline of significant events for the African-American Members of Congress who served during this era.
2. Track voting records of black Members on key issues of the period.
3. Write a 100-word obituary for one of the black Members.
4. Design a campaign poster for a black candidate for Congress during this period.
5. Draft language for a resolution sponsored by an African-American Congressman in the 1870s on one of three hypothetical topics:
 - a. Posting of federal troops to guard the polling places in your state or district
 - b. Reimbursing the depositors in the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company (Freedmen's Bank)
 - c. Extending voting rights to women



ONLINE RESOURCES

History, Art & Archives | U.S. House of Representatives

A collaborative project between the Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House's Office of Art and Archives. Together, the offices serve as the House's institutional memory, and a resource for Members, staff, and the general public.

history.house.gov

Online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*

Searchable database that contains biographical information on every person who served in Congress.

bioguide.congress.gov

Senate Historical Office

Includes information on the history and art of the U.S. Senate such as facts and milestones, historical statistics, featured biographies, and a photographic collection.

senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/Senate_Historical_Office.htm

Congress.gov | Library of Congress

Searchable database of congressional legislation from 1973 to present (bill text and roll call votes are available from 1989 to present).

congress.gov

GPO Federal Digital System

Includes links for searchable databases of the *Congressional Record* and *House Journal* (1994 to present) as well as information on how to find the nearest federal depository library.

gpo.gov/fdsys