

James Johnson
Page, U.S. House of Representatives

The Long Struggle for Representation: Oral Histories of African Americans in Congress

“That’s How I Got to Oberlin”

James Johnson recalls how Ohio Congressman Charles Moser helped him attend his top-choice college.
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I got into the University of Illinois, University of Michigan, Lawrence in Wisconsin—a bunch of schools. Liked Oberlin, but it cost too much. So, it was just out of my price range. My parents could afford to support me at a level like the University of Illinois, but there’s no way they could afford Oberlin. It was just too expensive, so. One day, Congressman Ayers asked me, you know, “Where did you decide to go to college?” I said, “Well, probably Illinois, maybe Michigan. I’m not sure. I liked Oberlin, but, you know, it’s too expensive.” He said, “Oberlin in Ohio?” I said, “Yeah.” I said, “It, it, it seems like a really good place for me, but there’s no way my parents can afford it.” He said, “Oh, I think I may have a solution for that.” So he went down the hall to Congressman Mosher’s office—Congressman Charles Mosher from Oberlin, Ohio, alumnus of Oberlin, Ohio, whose cousin was the Dean of Men of Oberlin, Ohio—Oberlin College. And so, there was a phone call. And in less than a week, I had a new letter from Oberlin offering me a scholarship, a loan, and a job. So, that’s how I got to Oberlin.