

James Johnson
Page, U.S. House of Representatives

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

Page Appointment Retracted

James Johnson recalls his confusion when his Page appointment fell through.
Interview recorded October 24, 2019

We lived in the 2nd district, Congressional District in Illinois, which was Congressman Barratt O'Hara, who was a long-standing Irish politician—chain-smoker. I mean, his fingers were stained yellow from the nicotine. I mean, he would light up one cigarette with another. But Congressman O'Hara was a seasoned pro and he arranged for my appointment with, you know, my aunt. And as I said, my aunt was connected and so that's how it came about. So we came to Washington expecting to be appointed as a Page in the House of Representatives under the sponsorship of Barratt O'Hara. When we got here, it turned out they said, "Nope. There's no vacancy. There's, you know, you need to go back to Chicago," which caused a bit of a furor. I mean, we were completely blindsided. Remember, the school was the big draw and I came here in the wintertime between semesters. So, I finished my first semester in Chicago. And between semesters we came here expecting to not only be a Page, but expecting to go to school. So, when this happened, this was a big deal not only as to why it happened, but it was a big deal because now I'm not in school. And while this was being sorted out for a few weeks, I actually enrolled in Western High School and—because not going to school was not an option. So, how it happened? Originally, there was the talk that, "Well, he would have been the first negro Page and the Southerners didn't want that." Not sure that was actually the problem. There may have been some more internal issues within the Illinois delegation. But at any rate, there was no vacancy.