

White, George Henry ^[1]

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by William Z. Schenck, 1994

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18 Dec. 1852–28 Dec. 1918



Original image housed by National Archives and Records Administration "George Henry White (1852-1918) represented North Carolina's second district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1897 to 1901.

"Image courtesy of Learn NC, 2009.

George Henry White, lawyer, legislator, congressman, and racial spokesman, was born near Rosindale in [Bladen County](#) ^[5], the son of Wiley F. and Mary White. It is possible that he was born into slavery, although the evidence on this is contradictory. He did attend public schools in North Carolina and received training under D. P. Allen, president of the Whitten Normal School in Lumberton. In 1876 he was an assistant in charge of the exhibition mounted by the U.S. Coast Survey at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. After graduation from [Howard University](#) ^[6] in 1877, he was principal of the Colored Grade School, the Presbyterian parochial school, and the State Normal School in New Bern. He studied law under [Judge William J. Clarke](#) ^[7] and received a license to practice in North Carolina in 1879.

Entering politics in 1881, he served in the [North Carolina House of Representatives](#) ^[8] for [Craven County](#) ^[9]. Although an unsuccessful candidate for the [state senate](#) ^[10] in 1882, he represented the Eighth District in Congress for the 1885 term and was a member of the Judiciary, Insane Asylum, and Insurance committees. In 1886 he won election to a four-year term as district solicitor of the Second Judicial District. During this period White gained the respect of many white and Black voters in his district. In addition, he became more active in religious and fraternal organizations. A founder and elder of the [Ebenezer United Presbyterian Church in New Bern](#) ^[11], he served as grand master of both King Solomon Lodge No. 1 of New Bern (1899–90) and the Colored Masons of North Carolina (1892–93).

In 1894 White moved to Tarboro in order to live within the boundaries of the [Second Congressional District](#) ^[12]. This district, known as "The Black Second," included nine counties in the coastal plain area, from Warren and Northampton on the Virginia border to Lenoir in the south. All the counties had a sizable Black population; four Black Americans served in the U.S. Congress from the district between 1872 and 1900.

White lost his party's nomination for the U.S. House in 1894 to his brother-in-law [Henry Plummer Cheatham](#) ^[13], in a bitter fight that had to be settled finally by the [National Republican Congressional Committee](#) ^[14]. White was nominated by the Republicans in 1896, and in an election held under a liberalized election law enacted by the fusion legislature, he beat the incumbent Democratic representative, [Frederick A. Woodard](#) ^[15], 19,332 to 15,378. In 1898 White won reelection, defeating W. E. Fountain in a campaign dominated by the race issue.

As the only Black representative in Congress, White was an eloquent and vocal spokesman for his race. He is perhaps best known for his valedictory speech on 29 Jan. 1901 in which he spoke of the accomplishments of African Americans and of the hope for a better future. In his first term he was a member of the Agricultural Committee, and in the 56th Congress (1899–1901) he served on the District of Columbia Committee. Many of his speeches condemned the brutal treatment received by Black Americans in the South, and White introduced the first antilynching bill in Congress. He supported local bills and appointed Black Americans to federal positions (especially postmasters) in his district.

A successful campaign to disenfranchise Black Americans plus increasing anti-Black feeling prompted White not to seek reelection in 1900. When his term ended in 1901, he and his family moved to Washington, D.C., where he practiced law until 1905. He then went to Philadelphia. While continuing his law practice, he became involved in [banking](#) ^[16], founding the first Black-managed bank in Philadelphia. He also established an all-Black community in Cape May County, N.J., called Whitesboro.

White married Fannie B. Randolph in 1879, and they had one child, Della. In 1886 he married Cora Lina Cherry, the daughter of Henry C. Cherry, a Black politician from [Tarboro](#) ^[17]. They had two children, Mary A. and George H., Jr.

Update from the N.C. Government & Heritage Library and the N.C. Museum of History

Research is currently being conducted into election returns to verify the history of George White's service in the North Carolina House of Representatives. We currently know that he was elected to the North Carolina State Senate from Craven County in 1884. Senator White also served in the January-March 1885 session of the General Assembly of North Carolina.

Additionally, George H. White did not represent North Carolina's Eighth District in Congress for the 1885 term. He never served the Eighth District. Rather, he was elected from the Second North Carolina Congressional District for that term. Additionally, all four of the state's Black Republican congressmen elected during Reconstruction were elected from the Second Congressional District. George White never lived nor was he elected from the Eighth District.

-- Earl Ijames, Curator, N.C. Museum of History, and Kelly Agan, N.C. Government & Heritage Library, 2019

Educator Resources:

Grades K-8: <https://www.ncpedia.org/white-george-henry-k-8> ^[4]

Grade 8: George Henry White: The American Phoenix. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium.<http://civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2013/11/GeorgeHenryWhiteAmericanPhoenix...> ^[18]

References:

Eric D. Anderson, "Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872–1901: The Black Second" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1978)

Biog. Dir. Am. Cong. (1961); Helen Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894–1901* (1951)

George W. Reid, "A Biography of George H. White, 1852–1918" (Ph.D. diss., Howard University, 1974) and "The Post-Congressional Career of George H. White, 1901–1918," *Journal of Negro History* 61 (October 1976).

Additional Resources:

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress: <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000372> ^[19]

"George Henry White" from *Black Americans in Congress* by the Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives. <http://baic.house.gov/member-profiles/profile.html?intID=22> ^[20]

WUNC Radio, an audio file of the marker honoring White: http://wunc.org/tsot/archive/Honoring_George_White.mp3/view ^[21]

UNC Libraries, North Carolina Collection, North Carolina Election of 1898: <http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/1898/bios/white.html> ^[22]

Justesen, Benjamin R. *George Henry White: An Even Chance in the Race of Life* LSU Press. 2001. <http://books.google.com/books?id=CPJ3vtGHL3MC&pg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false> [23]

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