

George Henry White: a Biographical Sketch ^[1]

George Henry White's first public speech came at an [Emancipation](#) ^[2] Day gathering in the small coastal town of Beaufort, North Carolina, where he shared the day's honors with other up-and-coming Black American politicians. At 26, White was still working as a teacher and school principal in the nearby city of New Bern, his home since finishing normal school at Howard University two years earlier. His determination to become a lawyer had led him to New Bern, at the invitation of a distinguished retired Republican judge and former Confederate officer, [William John Clarke](#) ^[3], under whose direction White had lately been reading the law.

White was still comparatively unknown outside New Bern, yet word of his [oratorical](#) ^[4] skills would quickly spread through North Carolina. His was a compelling story. The child of a free, mixed-race turpentine farmer in Columbus County, George White was born in Rosindale, Bladen County, on December 18, 1852. No details are available regarding his birth mother, who was likely an enslaved woman and appears to have died shortly after her son's birth. In 1857, his father, Wiley Franklin White, married Mary Anna Spaulding, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a [prominent](#) ^[5] free farmer of mixed race; she raised the youth as her own child, and in later years, George White always named her as his mother.

Although his early education was limited by circumstance, George White's determination and brilliance propelled him after the Civil War into a private normal school before entering Howard University in 1874. He later attributed much of his success to the intervention of David P. Allen, a Black teacher who founded the respected Whitin Normal School in nearby Lumberton, recruiting White as one of his first students.

In 1879, George White's astounding political career had yet to begin. Yet even white observers of the period would be quick to praise his legal skills and oratorical [prowess](#) ^[6], honed perhaps by years of listening to prominent Black figures as Frederick Douglass, a trustee at Howard during White's three-year tenure there, and Robert Brown Elliott, whose Congressional remarks on the civil rights bill in 1874 were so often hailed.

Although White's transcript at Howard shows just one specific course in public speaking or declamation, the handful of other courses called "Rhetoricals" almost certainly included extended training in oratory. He continued to exhibit a strong interest in the law, which he read on his own at Howard. By the time White obtained his normal certificate from Howard in 1877, however, the school's fledgling law department had closed temporarily, with no immediate promise of reopening.

Rather than accept a transitional job as a messenger in a federal department, White chose instead to accept a teaching post in New Bern, a small, predominantly black city still controlled by Republicans after the end of Reconstruction. Here he came under the [tutelage](#) ^[7] of Clarke, a former Superior Court judge now practicing law with his son. The Clarkes' commitment to the education and social progress of Black people underscored White's own dedication to public service and the advancement of his race.

When White passed the state's rigorous bar examination, personally administered in those days by the members of North Carolina's Supreme Court, he was the state's only black candidate in a class of 32. He then established a small practice in New Bern, becoming one of a half-dozen Black attorneys in the state.

While developing his law practice and running for his first public offices, White continued to work until 1883 as a schoolteacher and principal, serving for two years as the appointed principal of a new state-run normal training school for Black schoolteachers at New Bern. His detailed reports to the State [Superintendent](#) ^[8] of Public Instruction for those years are among the longest documents he is known to have written.

By the fall of 1880, White had also emerged as a formidable political candidate, winning election on the Republican ticket as a member of the North Carolina House from Craven County. He later served one term as a Republican in the state Senate (elected 1884) from Craven County, before serving two terms (1887-1894) as the nation's only elected black prosecutor, representing the state's so-called "black second" district.

White quickly established a solid reputation for skillful courtroom techniques and became a well-known figure in state Republican politics. After being touted in 1892 as a possible Republican candidate for state attorney general, White moved from New Bern to Tarboro, North Carolina, in 1894. Two years later, he won his first term in the United States Congress from the Second [Congressional District](#) ^[9], after defeating his brother-in-law, former Congressman [Henry Plummer Cheatham](#) ^[10], for the party nomination in 1896.

Reelected to Congress in a three-way race in 1898, White was the nation's only Black Congressman for four years, gaining national recognition as a vocal defender of civil rights and political equality for his race, and serving as a state delegate to two national Republican conventions, in 1896 and 1900.

The gradual [disfranchisement](#) ^[11] of Black voters by Southern states and the rising tide of white supremacy terrorism and Black voter suppression across the South brought an end to White's political career in North Carolina. He was the last Black member of Congress to serve until 1929, and the last to be elected from North Carolina until the 1990s.

After declining to run for Congress again in 1900, White severed ties with his native state, moving his family to

Washington, D.C., and later to Philadelphia, where he practiced law. But he continued to fight for civil rights on a national level, serving as an officer in the short-lived National Afro-American Council and as an early leader in its successor, the NAACP, as well as in other organizations, including the Constitution League and the National Negro Bankers' Association.

George White devoted the last two decades of his life primarily to two significant business activities, as president of Philadelphia's first black-owned commercial savings bank and as the founder of a land development company in southern New Jersey. The small town of Whitesboro, New Jersey, an experimental industrial colony for black settlers in Cape May County, still stands. He served as an active honorary trustee of Howard University for 20 years, as well as a trustee of Biddle University in Charlotte, North Carolina, both of which awarded him honorary degrees.

White continued to speak out on social and political issues, and never lost interest in politics. For years he campaigned vigorously for Republican candidates for local and state office in Philadelphia. In 1912, he briefly attempted a comeback to Congress in an unsuccessful quest for the Republican nomination in a special election in Philadelphia's First District. In 1916, he was selected as Pennsylvania's first black alternate state delegate to the national Republican convention in Chicago. In 1917, a year before his death, he was appointed as an assistant city solicitor ^[12] in Philadelphia. He died at his home there on December 28, 1918.

White was married four times and widowed three times. His first three wives, all buried in New Bern, N.C., were Fannie B. Randolph White (1859-1880, m. 1879); Nancy J. Scott White (1862-1882, m. 1882); and Cora Lena Cherry White (1864-1905, m. 1887). His fourth wife, Ellen Avant McDonald White (b. 1877, m. 1915), moved after White's death to Atlantic City, New Jersey, and remarried; she is believed to have died in the 1960s.

George White is buried in Eden Cemetery in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia, beside the graves of two of his four children: daughter Mary Adelyne ("Mamie") White (1887-1974) and son George H. White, Jr. (1893-1927). Two other daughters are buried elsewhere: Beatrice Odessa White (1891-1892), buried in New Bern, North Carolina, and Della Mae White Garrett (1880-1916), buried in Washington, D.C. Della's daughter Fannie, born in Asheville, North Carolina, about 1905, was George White's only known grandchild; no other details are available on her life and death.

White's father, Wiley F. White (1820-1893), is also buried in New Bern. His stepmother, Mary Anna Spaulding White, died in Washington, D.C., in 1912. White's siblings included one older half-brother, John W. White of Columbus County (1846-1920), and at least one younger half-sister, Flora White, who was born in Columbus County in about 1858 and who had moved with her husband to Georgia by the 1890s.

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