## Equal Rights League 191

# **Equal Rights League**

by Benjamin R. Justesen, 2006

The North Carolina State Equal Rights League, founded in 1865, grew out of the state's first reedmen's convention [2], held in Raleigh on 29 Sept. 1865. Although the state was ruled by Presidential [3] Reconstruction [4] (and effectively under military occupation), African Americans remained politically powerless. Led by provisional governor William W. Holden [5], North Carolina's white politicians had agreed a week earlier to hold a state convention in October to deal with the political actions required for reentry into the Union; they were prepared to repeal the Ordinance of Secession is but would not consider granting the vote rato freed slaves.

The convention of September 1865 was a clear attempt by black leaders to press for full political rights for African Americans, including the right to vote. The call for the meeting had originated in New Bern, which also produced the convention's first president, Pennsylvania native James W. Hood (8), an African Methodist Episcopal (9) minister who had moved to New Bern as a church missionary in 1864. In his acceptance speech, Hood endorsed voting rights for all black males, but some of the 150 delegates disagreed, including James H. Harris [10] of Raleigh.

Harris, a teacher, initially favored "moderation, reconciliation with whites, and education for blacks." He and Abraham H. Galloway of Wilmington engineered the passage of compromise resolutions to be presented at the state convention using "moderate and well-chosen language" supporting the protection and education of freedpeople and the elimination of racial discrimination in order to neutralize the original demand for black suffrage. Harris's personal charisma and shrewd leadership of the moderate wing quickly elevated him to prominence. When delegates voted to establish the Equal Rights League as the convention's vehicle for lobbying state and federal political leaders afterward, Harris was elected its first president.

By 1866 Harris was calling for full political rights for black men, including the right to vote and to hold office. His short-lived moderation on the issue was due, at least in part, to the intransigence of white <u>Democrats [11]</u>, who allowed only limited civil and political rights to freedpeople under a new black code enacted by the 186<u>General Assembly [12]</u>. In North Carolina, as in most southern states, Democrats and Conservatives still remained adamantly opposed to black suffrage; the legislature grudgingly accepted the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery but denied that it gave Congress the power to rule on civil and political rights for freed slaves

Only federal action, in fact, succeeded in forcing the issue; congressional passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Act extended voting rights to black males, who immediately registered as Republicans. By early 1868, the Republican Party [15] suddenly controlled a majority of delegates to North Carolina's constitutional convention, thanks to the registration of more than 70,000 black voters. Among those chosen to write the state's new constitution was Harris, who soon became one of more than a dozen black members of the 1868 North Carolina General Assembly. With the onset of black male suffrage, the North Carolina chapter of the Equal Rights League had all but vanished by early 1868.

W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880 (1992).

Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions, 1865-1900(1986).

### Additional Resources:

North Carolina Division of State Historic Sites and Properties. "North Carolina's Civil War Story: War's End and Reconstruction." 2011 http://civilwarexperience.ncdcr.gov/narrative/narrative-4.htm [14]

Beckel, Deborah. Radical Reform: Interracial Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina(115). Charlottesville:University of Virginia Press, 2010

Greenwood, Janette Thomas. Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White "Better Classes" in Charlotte, 1850-1910,119. Chapel Hill:University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

### Subjects:

Black and African American People [17] Civil Rights [18] Political movements and parties [19] Reconstruction (1865-1876) [4]

Justesen, Benjamin R. [20] Origin - location:

New Bern [21]

Raleigh [22

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.[23]

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