

READING

“The Honoured Representative of Four Millions of Colored People”

Please note that this reading contains certain racial epithets. We have chosen to include them in order to honestly communicate the bigoted language of the time.

Historian Douglas R. Egerton describes the life and political career of Mississippi politician Blanche K. Bruce, the first African American to serve a full six-year term in the United States Senate.

Just ten years after President Abraham Lincoln, in his final public address, advocated voting rights for the “very intelligent [blacks], and on those who serve in our cause as soldiers,” Blanche Kelso Bruce, a former slave, raised his right hand to take the oath of office as a U.S. senator from Mississippi. Garbed in a black suit and starched white cotton shirt, his black waistcoat adorned with a fourteen-karat-gold pocket watch, the stout, slightly balding statesman looked older than his thirty-four years. His dark “wavy” hair and newly trimmed van dyke revealed his mother’s heritage, while his light skin was the legacy of his father and former master. Preceded in the Senate by Hiram Revels, who had served a partial term from 1870 to 1871, Bruce took his oath less than two decades after Chief Justice Roger B. Taney announced that blacks were not citizens in the country of their birth. “Unpretending and unostentatious,” the *Memphis Planet* [newspaper] conceded, “he moves quietly on, the honoured representative of four millions of colored people.”



Portrait of Blanche K. Bruce

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Born in 1841 in Farmville, Virginia, the child then known as Branch and his five siblings were slaves because their mother, Polly Bruce, was a slave. Blanche later insisted that his father, Pettis Perkinson, had treated him as “tenderly” as he had treated his white children, and the young slave—who changed his name to Blanche while still in his teens—was employed as a domestic to his half brother and taught to read. But in an act that demonstrated that the war truly could be a conflict of brothers, in 1861 Blanche’s white half brother William left to join the Confederate cause. Blanche decided “to emancipate [him]self” and decamped for the abolitionist stronghold of Lawrence, Kansas, where he found employment as a teacher. The decision nearly proved a fatal one when in August 1863 the town was sacked by Confederate guerrillas led by William Clarke Quantrill. The raiders murdered 183 men and boys, slaughtering anybody above the age of fourteen, but Bruce was able to hide in bushes behind his house. “Quantrill’s band certainly would not have spared a colored man,” Bruce later wrote.

After the war, Bruce briefly attended Oberlin College, the rural Ohio school widely known for its abolitionist origins and progressive attitudes on educational integration. His meager financial resources soon forced him to withdraw, but while working on a Mississippi River steamboat, Bruce heard about opportunities for ambitious black men in the lower South. Arriving in Mississippi in February 1869, at a time when the state had not yet been readmitted to Congress, Bruce settled in Bolivar County, a devoutly Republican region with a four-to-one advantage in black voters. ... He quickly won elections for sheriff, then tax collector and superintendent of education, all while editing a local newspaper. Senators were then chosen by state assemblies, and on February 3, 1874, Bruce was chosen by the Mississippi legislature to serve in the national Senate. He journeyed north toward Washington to begin what would become the first full term served by an African American senator. There he joined black Congressmen John Adams Hyman of North Carolina and Robert Smalls, who succeeded Richard "Daddy" Cain in South Carolina's fifth district. Congressman John Roy Lynch, one of the youngest members of the House, continued to represent Mississippi's sixth district. "A turn in fortune's wheel" was one white editor's characterization of just how dramatically the political world had been turned upside down.

As the only man of color in the [Senate] chamber, Bruce sought to position himself as the servant of his state's entire population and dispel any notions that he was a single-issue politician. That meant seeking to appease his state's other senator, James I. Alcorn. Just one month into his term, Bruce stepped across the aisle to converse with Alcorn, a conservative Republican and former Confederate officer who routinely caucused with the chamber's Democrats. Alcorn had not seen fit to honor the tradition of escorting his junior colleague to his swearing-in ceremony, but Bruce was not a man to carry a grudge. The two were engaged in "harmonious conversation" when above them in the gallery, two white observers began to loudly discuss the novelty of "a nigger coming over to sit with Democrats in the United States Senate." The second man, a Marylander, admitted that Bruce "looks clean, and maybe he will keep his place and be respectful." But most senators, well aware of just how far their country had progressed since 1861, accepted his presence, if perhaps grudgingly. "He has made a most favorable impression upon the members of the Senate and those with whom he came into contact," observed one black editor. In politics, power and influence could trump race. If Mississippi Unionists preferred their senator to be white, the

reality was that Bruce held the seat, and he shared their vision of regional prosperity, even if they did not share his of an interracial democracy. One Pennsylvania Republican visited Bruce's office and was surprised to find a "small army of white Mississippians" in his waiting room, all of them "ready to swear by you." The northern man thought that curious. He had never before met white southerners, and he "had a lurking idea that these people were all down on a negro on general principles." But Reconstruction was an era of new opportunities, and southern whites, whether they dreaded it or accepted it, had seen this day coming for nearly a decade.¹

¹ Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 245–47.