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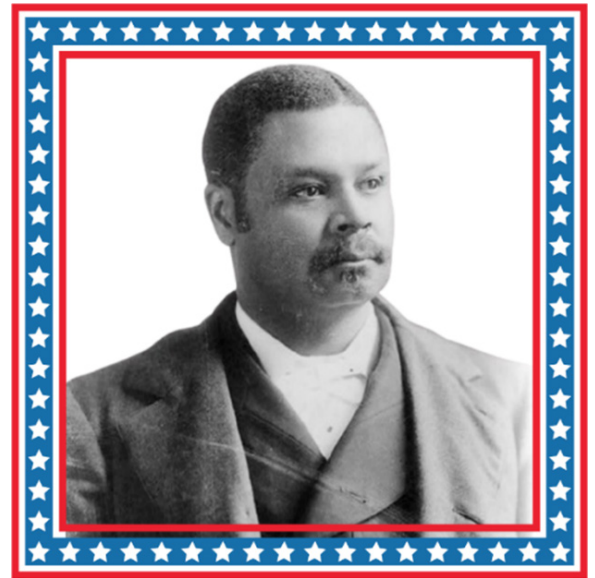
BACKGROUND: 1901 George H. White's Address to Congress

George Henry White (1852-1918) was a Bladen County North Carolina native. He had a mixed-race father and a mother who was likely enslaved. In 1874, he enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C. After graduating, he worked as a legal apprentice and passed the state bar exam.

In 1880, White was elected to the North Carolina House of Representatives. He helped pass a law to create more teacher training schools for African Americans. He became a State Senator in 1884 and later served as prosecuting attorney for the state's second judicial district. In 1896, White won election to the U.S. Congress as the representative of the same, mostly Black, district.

White was the last of five African Americans elected to Congress during the Jim Crow era. From 1897 to 1901, he was the only voice in Congress for about 10 million African Americans. On January 1, 1901, the North Carolina General Assembly passed an amendment that made it harder for Black men to vote, causing White to leave politics. In his final speech on January 29, he stated that although he was saying a "temporary farewell" to Congress, African Americans would eventually "rise up" again, "phoenix-like."

White later moved to Philadelphia, where he started his own law firm and founded the People's Savings Bank. He also started a land development company in New Jersey to help Black citizens buy land, homes, and businesses. He was able to accomplish a great deal and serve others, despite the discrimination he faced.



George H. White, U.S. House of Representatives collection

Reflections



Greek Phoenix by Diafora,
Wikimedia image

Phoenix as Symbol

In mythology, the phoenix is an immortal bird that dies in flames and then is continually reborn.

Associated with the sun, a phoenix gains new life by rising from the ashes of its predecessor.

In George White's speech, he alludes to this mythological bird. Why do you think he chose the phoenix as a symbol for African Americans' political struggle in North Carolina?

SELECTIONS & QUESTIONS:

George H. White's Address to Congress

Directions: Read the following selections from George H. White's final speech, "Defense of the Negro Race – Charges Answered," January 29, 1901. For each section, answer the corresponding questions.

"In the catalogue of members of Congress in this House perhaps none have been more persistent in their determination to bring the black man into disrepute and, with a labored effort, to show that he was unworthy of the right of citizenship than my colleague from North Carolina, Mr. Kitchin. During the first session of this Congress, while the constitutional amendment was pending in North Carolina, he labored long and hard to show that the white race was at all times and under all circumstances superior to the Negro by inheritance if not otherwise, and the excuse for his party supporting that amendment, which has since been adopted, was that an illiterate Negro was unfit to participate in making the laws of a sovereign state and the administration and execution of them; but an illiterate white man living by his side, with no more or perhaps not as much property, with no more exalted character, no higher thoughts of civilization, no more knowledge of the handicraft of government, had by birth, because he was white, inherited some peculiar qualification..."

Who is White addressing in his speech? Why is he addressing him?

What is White's argument as to why the 1901 voting amendment is unfair?

"I would like to advance the statement that the musty records of 1868, filed away in the archives of Southern capitols, as to what the Negro was thirty-two years ago, is not a proper standard by which the Negro living on the threshold of the twentieth century should be measured."

What is White saying here about upholding an outdated standard?

"This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the Negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again. These parting words are in behalf of an outraged, heartbroken, bruised, and bleeding, but God-fearing people, faithful, industrious, loyal people-rising people, full of potential force.

Now that you know what the phoenix symbolizes, what emotions does it evoke in this speech?

Mr. Chairman, in the trial of Lord Bacon, when the court disturbed the counsel for the defendant, Sir Walter Raleigh raised himself up to his full height and, addressing the court, said, 'Sir, I am pleading for the life of a human being.'

What is the point White is making at the conclusion of his speech?

The only apology that I have to make for the earnestness with which I have spoken is that I am pleading for the life, the liberty, the future happiness, and manhood suffrage for one-eighth of the entire population of the United States."