

In May 1874, in the absence of the speaker, Joseph H. Rainey presided over the U.S. House of Representatives. This was the second of two illustrious firsts for him, for he was the first black seated in the House of Representatives, and the first black to occupy the speaker's chair.(1) This prompted the New York Herald to print the bold headline: "A liberated slave in the speaker's chair." 1874 was also the year in which Mr. Rainey bought a home in Windsor.(2) Here for the next decade or so, he and his wife Susan, along with their children, spent their summers. These were pleasant years for the Raineys, and they were involved in the community and active in the Congregational Church.

Joseph Hayne Rainey was born a slave on June 21st 1832, in Georgetown, S.C., and although his father, a successful barber, bought the family out of slavery, young Joseph could not attend school because it was a "criminal offense to teach black children."(3) He did manage to obtain some education through private sources, and from his father he learned the barbering trade. In 1859 he married Susan, a part French-quadroon girl, who was probably from Louisiana by way of the French West Indies.(4) They were well suited for each others, and shared a philosophy rooted in personal growth. Three years later the Civil War was in progress and Rainey, with other free blacks in the area, was drafted to work in the entrenchments around the city of Charleston.(5) Keenly aware that the war would only worsen the plight of the blacks, he secretly made plans to leave the country. In 1862 Joseph and Susan Rainey escaped to Bermuda aboard a blockade runner.(6)

They prospered there, he as a barber and she as a dressmaker. In fact, according to the Bermuda National Trust, Susan became "Bermuda's premier dressmaker." She even opened a branch of Madam Demarest's Emporium of Fashion then located on Broadway in New York. They remained in Hamilton, Bermuda, until the fall 1866, when they returned to South Carolina, settling back in Georgetown.(7)

Here we are told Joseph earned his living in mercantile pursuits and became a leader in the black community. He also joined the Republican Party, and became a member of the executive committee of the State Republican Party. In the winter of 1868 he was a delegate to the South Carolina Constitutional Convention in Charleston. Speaking of the constitution that was drawn up there, he said afterward: "our constitution towers up in its majesty with provisions for the equal protection of all classes of citizens."(8) Ironically, these words spoken by a man who would become a member of the First Church in Windsor, reflected the contributions of two of its earlier members. One was Oliver Ellsworth. He had been a participant at the United States Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. The other was Roger Ludlow, the Windsor lawyer who authored the Fundamental Orders of 1539. That document has been called "the first written constitution of a purely representative government."(9)

In State politics Rainey went on to a four-year term in the senate, where he was also Chairman of the Finance Committee. In the summer of 1870 he was nominated to fill a vacancy in the House of Representatives in Washington. The election was close, but nearly 9,000 votes out of the 17,193 cast were enough to put him over the top. And on December 12th 1870, Joseph Hayne Rainey became the first black American sworn into the United States House of Representatives.(10)

On April 1st 1871 he delivered a speech that was the keynote to a congressional career of compassionate and liberating legislative involvement. In that address he firmly called for legislation to enforce the 14th ammendment which in part says that "No state shall ...deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."(11) In that instance Mr. Rainey was speaking in response to the outrages at the South Carolina polls.(12) Strains of that April 1st speech reverberated throughout Mr. Rainey's five terms in the House. Variousy during the years he supported the rights of the Chinese minority in California, as well as those of the American Indians. Additionally, he presented petitions guaranteeing blacks their full constitutional rights, as well as access to public accomodations. His courage and conviction in these matters led him to enter and refuse to leave a segregated dining room in Suffolk, Virginia, at a time when such defiance was dangerous.(3) During Mr. Rainey's nearly nine years in the House, he earned a reputation as an eloquent speaker and a solid Republican. By the late 1870's being a Republican in South Carolina politics had become a liability. He campaigned hard for a seat in the 46th Congress but was defeated in 1878 by Democrat John Richardson.(14)

His post-congressional years were anticlimatic. From 1879 until 1881 he served as an internal revenue agent, and twice in those years was defeated in his bid for the House clerkship. Putting politics behind him for good, Mr. Rainey spent the next five years in banking and brokerage, and also as a principal in two railway companies.(15) None of these were successful for him, and in 1886 in poor health he, along with Susan, returned to Georgetown. There he died at the relatively young age of 55 on August 27th 1887.(16)

His passing was deeply felt and in Windsor, his adopted town, a local newspaper reported that Mr. Rainey's death "has cast a gloom over this town."(17) The Rainey legacy, anything but gloomy, remains however one of enlightenment. He believed we all have a right to be here. In living up to the responsibilities which accompany that right, he set a shining example, because once he got himself unshackled, he really soared.

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