

In the nineteenth century before the institution of slavery was abolished, those few blacks who managed to obtain their freedom found themselves in a social limbo. Envied by the slaves, distrusted and feared by whites, the price they paid for freedom was more than monetary. They were not citizens, but were taxed and restricted far more than if they had been. In South Carolina, no free blacks could enter the state and those who left could not return. It was necessary for them to have a white man as sponsor and guardian, and they worked only at the trades or as servants. Yet in spite of these obstacles, a few free blacks were able to overcome their problems to an extent and become important members of society.

Edward L. Rainey, a barber by trade, purchased his freedom in addition to that of his wife, Gracia, and children. While the educational opportunities available to free black children were at best limited before the War Between the States, Rainey saw to it that his offspring were schooled as well as possible. His youngest son, Joseph Hayne, born June 21, 1832, received some education through private instruction. When he reached adulthood, he adopted his father's vocation and together the men ran a prosperous shop.

Edward Rainey accumulated considerable property during his lifetime. According to his will of 1832 he owned, in addition to his home on Prince Street, a lot at the corner of Prince and Orange Streets, a lot and house on King Street, and four lots and stores on Bay (now Front) Street. The house most closely associated with Joseph Hayne Rainey is the dwelling at 909 Prince Street, where he possibly was born and raised.

According to Edward Rainey's will, it was to come into the hands of Joseph's mother until she might remarry. Next it was to pass to Joseph and his brother, Edward II. The structure, known as the Rainey-Camlin House, is one of the more important homes in the City of Georgetown Historic District since it retains much of its original interior fabric. The two and one-half story clapboard house has been carefully restored and in 1975 received the Distinguished Preservation Award from the Historic Georgetown County Foundation.

In 1859, on a trip to Philadelphia, Joseph met and married a part-French quadroon girl named Susan who was probably from Louisiana. His illegal interstate travel was discovered by the authorities and got him into trouble, but friends managed to arrange his return to South Carolina. The couple moved to Charleston, where young Rainey was working at the Mills House when the War Between the States broke out. In 1862 he was conscripted for a time as a steward aboard a Confederate blockade

runner. When he was assigned to building Confederate fortifications in Charleston Harbor, Rainey began planning escape for his wife and himself.

Later in the year the couple fled to Hamilton, Bermuda, where Rainey operated his own barbershop while his wife set up a dressmaking business. Both enterprises prospered; "Barber's Alley" in Hamilton was named for Rainey and remains as a tourist attraction.

In his spare time Rainey continued his education with the help of neighbors and friends who lent him their books. After the close of the War he heard rumors of a better life for blacks in the United States and tales of blacks attaining public prominence. He even learned that there was talk of men of his race running for political office; these stories whetted his yearning to return to his home in Georgetown County.

The rumors which had filtered into Bermuda were indeed true. South Carolina was fast becoming one of the states with the greatest number of black officials, a fact due to its large non-white population. In 1867, only ten counties had a majority of white voters; in Georgetown County black voters outnumbered whites six to one. It was in 1867, a year after returning to Georgetown, that Joseph H. Rainey launched his political career. In July he was appointed a member of the Executive Committee of the South Carolina Republican Party and in November was elected to represent Georgetown County at the Constitutional Convention in Charleston which met in January, 1868. That year, Rainey was elected to the State Senate, where he served as Secretary of the State Finance Committee and as Deputy Marshal to take the census.

In July, 1870, the United States House of Representatives voted to refuse the inadequate credentials of B. F. Whittemore, a former Union Army chaplain who had been sent to South Carolina by the Freedmen's Bureau to organize schools in the eastern part of the state, and was later elected to Congress from the 1st District. Rainey resigned from the State Senate to accept the seat in the Forty-first Congress left vacant when Whittemore was ousted, thereby becoming the first black American to serve in the House. He eventually was to serve in the Forty-second, Forty-third, Forty-fourth, and Forty-fifth Congresses (1871-1879).

Because of his color, Rainey attracted more attention than did other Congressmen of comparable limited experience and he proved himself adept at expressing the political aims of his race. In appearance Rainey was an arresting figure, "a light mulatto with regular features; bright genial eyes; pleasant expression; broad, clear brow;

Cover:

Joseph Hayne Rainey

Photo Courtesy of
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and a profusion of silky hair;" he carried his medium frame with a liteness which suggested a larger stature. His small hands were extremely expressive, and Rainey knew how to use them effectively in gesturing to emphasize a point. His speech was fluent, at times eloquent, and always earnest and in modulated tones.

When Congress convened in December, 1870, Rainey was sworn in but seldom took an active part in the proceedings. During this session the young Congressman delivered three short speeches for the removal of political disabilities and one on behalf of the National Colored Labor Convention.

Rainey was more active in the Forty-second Congress, which met in March, 1871. On April 1 he delivered his first major speech—a vigorous plea for legislation to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment (one feature of which assures the voting rights of all men) in which he called for action against outrages at the South Carolina polls. In this speech however, as in several others, Rainey spoke out against

bitterness and expressed pride in his state's accomplishments.

Congressman Rainey was even more energetic in the next session of Congress; he made several speeches, speaking in favor of the Ku Klux Act and of amnesty if linked to civil rights. He presented ten petitions for the passage of the Civil Rights Bill which would guarantee blacks their full constitutional rights, as well as access to public accommodations such as hotels, entertainment places, and schools. He dramatized his stand on the issue by entering and refusing to leave the dining room of a hotel in Suffolk, Virginia, and allowing himself to be forcibly removed from the premises. Rainey also proposed a bill to establish an American steamship line for trade and mail delivery to Haiti, though no action was ever taken on it.

Rainey's district was so thoroughly Republican that he faced no opposition in the election of 1872. By this time he had earned a new prestige and was completely at ease



Rainey-Camlin House

Photo by Christopher Breeze

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with the duties of his office. As a member of the Forty-third Congress, Rainey was appointed to the Indian Affairs and Freedmen's Bureaus and to a special committee to attend the funeral of Senator Charles Sumner. He was the only black present at the memorial services held in the House who delivered a eulogy. At another point in the session, feeling that South Carolina had been neglected in the distribution of appropriations, Rainey also supported the rights of the Chinese minority in California and of the American Indians. In a House debate over a proposed bill to improve conditions on Indian reservations, Rainey received a special honor never before accorded a black in Congress, that of presiding over the House of Representatives in the absence of the Speaker. The incident provoked the New York *Herald* to print the bold headline, "A Liberated Slave in the Speaker's Chair."

Rainey was often lauded by the press for his excellent command of words and able arguments which evoked sympathy from both Democrats and Republicans in the House. In debate, he showed himself to be a man of courtesy and sophistication rather than aggressiveness, yet he was capable of deftly disarming his opponents in the verbal jousts. However, he never attempted to humiliate the Southern whites whom he had replaced. After his reelection to the Forty-fourth Congress, Rainey delivered his most extended (and probably his best) speech, in which he again insisted on all civil rights for blacks but attempted to show that the granting of these rights alone would not bring social equality. He told the members of the House:

Social equality consists in congeniality of feeling, a reciprocity of sentiment and mutual social recognition among men which is granted according to desire and taste and not by any known or possible law.... I venture to assert to my white fellow citizens that we, the colored people, are not in quest of social equality. For one I do not ask to be received into your family circles if you are not disposed to receive me there. Among my own race we have as much respectability, intelligence, virtue and refinement possible to expect from any class circumstanced as we have been.

Although the House of the Forty-fourth Congress was led by the Democrats, Rainey was treated well in the assignment of committee posts; he was appointed a member of the Special Centennial Committee in addition to his membership on two regular committees, Invalid Pensions and the Freedmen's Bank.

Rainey's voting record in the House reveals his legislative policies. As did other black Congressmen,

Rainey listened primarily to the dictates of his party and then to the interests of his constituents, and could almost always be counted on to back anything stamped 'Republican.'

In 1878, when running for his fifth term in the House, Rainey was defeated after a long dispute over his seat by a white Democrat, John Richardson. At that time, he decided to retire from political life and from 1878 until 1881 Rainey served as an internal revenue agent for the United States Treasury Department in South Carolina. He returned for a brief time to the political arena when he was persuaded to run for the clerkship of the state House of Representatives, but was overwhelmingly defeated. Later Rainey was engaged in banking and conducted a brokerage business in Washington, D. C. He was one of twelve stockholders in the Greenville & Columbia Railroad Company and a charter member of the Columbia Street Railway Company.

In 1886, tired and in ill health, Joseph Hayne Rainey returned to his home in Georgetown. There he lived quietly in relative obscurity until his death on August 2, 1887. It is recorded merely that he was buried "in the Baptist Cemetery," and the exact location of the grave is unknown, a poor tribute to the courageous, dignified man who had forged a new path for his struggling race.

For additional reading:

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