

**"I am contented to be what I am, so long as I have my rights."**

**Joseph Rainey**

The above was quoted from the December 1995 issue of Life Magazine and quite surprised us here at the Society. We know Mr. Rainey as a summer resident of Windsor who resided at 299 Palisado Avenue. This year our Director stopped in Georgetown, SC, to visit the home of this distinguished Windsor personage.



299 Palisado Avenue, Windsor, CT

Joseph Rainey was our nation's first Black congressman. "A confident, aggressive politician, Rainey was re-elected four times and served until 1879." Joseph was born on Prince Street in Georgetown, SC, on June 21, 1832, to Edward L. and Gracia Rainey, a barber and freeman. He was described as:

*a light mulatto with regular features; bright genial eyes; pleasant expression; broad clear brow; 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.*

There were few educational opportunities for a freeman's children, but Joseph received a limited education through private instruction. Upon attaining adulthood, he joined his father's trade, and the two men ran a prosperous barber shop.

On a trip to Philadelphia in 1859, he met and married a part-French quadroon girl named Susan. The couple moved to Charleston as the

Civil War broke out in 1861. When he was assigned to building Confederate fortifications in the Charleston Harbor, he began planning an escape for his wife and himself. They fled to Hamilton, Bermuda, where he again practiced barbering. Barber's Alley in Hamilton is named for Joseph. Susan conducted a dressmaking business. In Bermuda he found a climate where he could educate himself with the help of his neighbors and friends who lent him books. When the War was over, Joseph heard of new opportunities for Black men in South Carolina. The state's population was largely non-white; and in Georgetown County, Black voters outnumbered whites six to one. Susan and Joseph returned to Georgetown, and he launched his political career in 1867. As a member of the state's Republican Party, he was appointed as a member of the Executive Committee. Later that year he represented Georgetown County at the Constitutional Convention in Charleston. The next year he 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 Rainey was accepted into the US House of Representatives.

In the beginning of that term, he seldom took an active part in the proceedings. By 1871 he delivered his first major speech - a vigorous plea to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment and assure the voting rights of *all* men. In the next session of Congress he spoke in favor of the Ku Klux Act and for 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 and schools. He dramatized his stand on the issue by entering and refusing to leave the dining room of a hotel in Suffolk, VA, and allowing himself to be forcibly removed from the premises.

The next year he was appointed to the Indian Affairs and Freedmen's Bureaus. He attended the funeral of Senator Charles Sumner and was the only Black present to deliver a

eulogy. He supported the rights of the Chinese minority in California and the American Indians. He presided over the House of Representatives in the Speaker's absence during a debate over a proposed bill to improve conditions on Indian reservations. Concerning civil rights, 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.*

In 1878 he decided to retire from political life and served as an Internal Revenue agent in South Carolina. Later he engaged in banking and had a brokerage business in Washington, DC.

He bought the house on the northwest corner of 299 Palisado Avenue and Old Kennedy Road on May 20, 1874, for \$4,000. It is said that the large locust tree in its yard was brought north and planted by him. He was one of three local politicians to give an address at Windsor's centennial celebration on July 4, 1876. He stated that he was proud to be an American citizen "since the nation had proved its sincerity to the doctrines of its Declaration Of Independence by making all of its citizens free and equal before the law."

By 1886 he was tired and in ill health and returned to his home in Georgetown, SC. There he lived quietly until his death on August 2, 1887, and was buried in the Baptist cemetery. From an obituary in an August 10, 1887, Hartford paper we read:

*...the colored ex-congressman who died last week used to spend his summer at Windsor and was a leading Congregationalist and an earnest advocate of temperance. He went to Washington last year to enter business, selling his household goods and his small farm; which is incumbered, and will probably be sold. His wife was the president and life of the Chautauqua society, and when she left, it died. She is a remarkably well-informed woman and with Mr. Rainey would answer more conundrums and*

*enigmas than all the white members combined. They moved in the best society, and their color never was thought of. Their children, three of them, are just as brilliant as their parents, the young boys can play difficult selections in public on the piano. In short, writes a Windsor correspondent, no better citizens could grave a town than J. H. Rainey and his estimable family. He very rarely alluded to his official life, and it never seemed to add an inch to his height. Going as he did through all the corruption of the South and being a leading colored republican without a taint on his honor speaks volumes for the man.*

*The information for this article comes from Life Magazine, December 1995; Historic Georgetown County Leaflet, No. 4; Report Of The Centennial Celebration ... At Windsor, Conn.; The Hartford Courant, 2/3/1991;*



### Poor Wilson, continued

*could not pull it through. He then walked to the door which leads to the keeper's hall, about 20 feet distant. As the keeper on duty opened it, he said "Wilson has cut me." ...The keeper sent to Hartford immediately for medical aid. ...A yard of intestine protruded from this small wound.*

It seems Wilson hoped that by wounding the warden, he would be placed in the city prison where his chances of an escape were increased. After murdering the warden, he was retained in the state prison where it was suggested that this chronic runaway be riveted to the floor boards "in the good old way."

David Kentley was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1824 and came to this country as an infant. His first crime was committed in Philadelphia when he was a boy, and in the end he claimed he had committed 800 such crimes. His last crime of murdering the prison warden ended his life on a scaffold on October 13, 1871.



