



James Thomas Rapier 1837–1883

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1873–1875
REPUBLICAN FROM ALABAMA

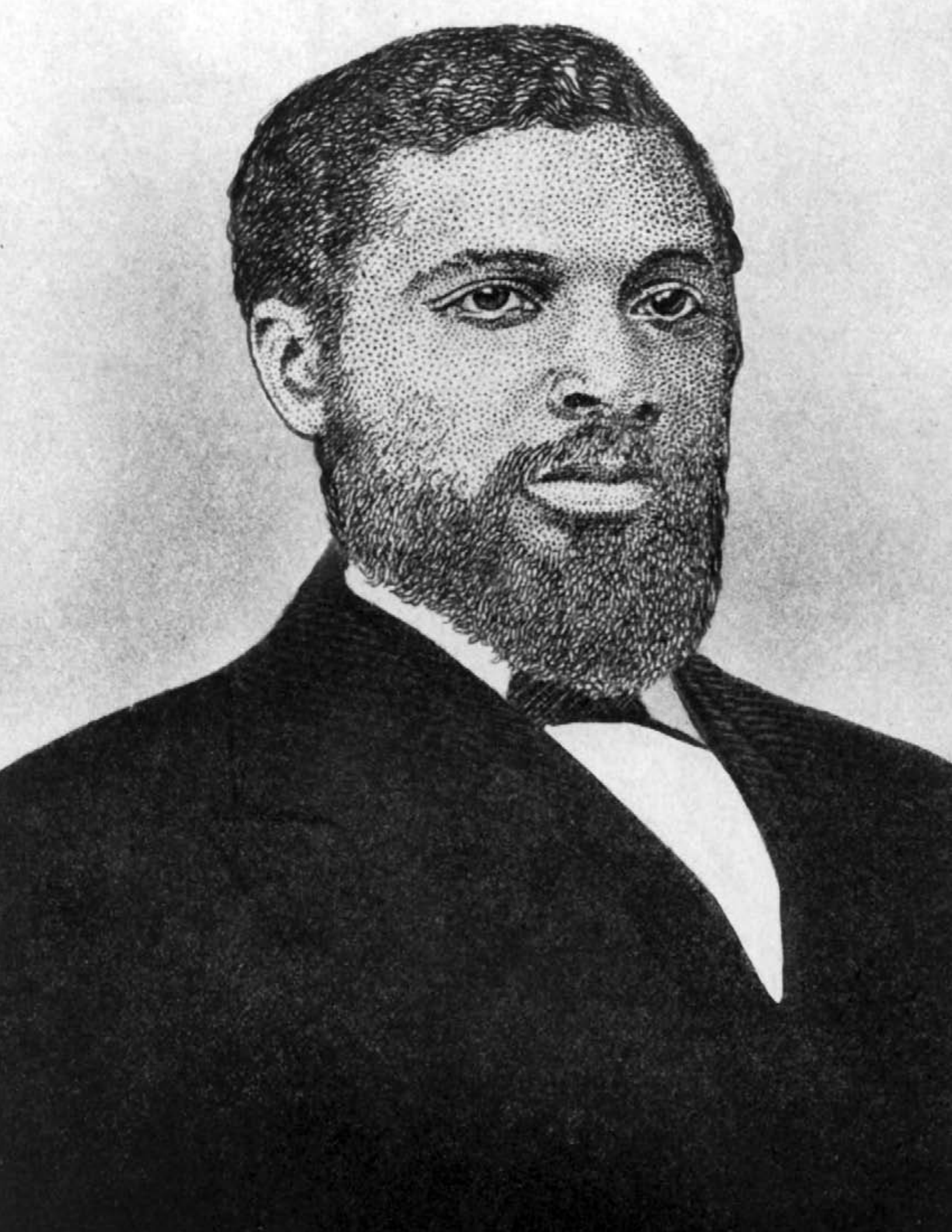
A freeborn Alabamian educated in Canada, James Thomas Rapier fended off death threats from the Ku Klux Klan, rose to the top of the state Republican Party, and won a seat in the 43rd Congress (1873–1875). Rapier was one of seven black Representatives who fought for the passage of the major Civil Rights Bill of 1875. “Mr. Speaker,” he declared on the House Floor, “nothing short of a complete acknowledgement of my manhood will satisfy me.”¹

James Thomas Rapier was born in Florence, Alabama, on November 13, 1837, to John H. and Susan Rapier. He had three older brothers: Richard, John, Jr., and Henry. The Rapiers were wealthy and well established in Florence. John Rapier, Sr., was a freed slave who had a lucrative business as a barber for 40 years.² Susan Rapier was a freeborn mulatto from Baltimore, Maryland, who died in 1841 during childbirth.³ Five-year-old James Rapier and his brother, John, Jr., went to live with their paternal grandmother, Sally Thomas. Supported by his grandmother’s work as a cleaning woman, James Rapier attended a secret school for black children from 1854 to 1856 but also spent a great deal of time drinking and gambling on riverboats.⁴ Disappointed with his son’s behavior, in 1856 John Rapier, Sr., sent him to live with another family member in the experimental black community of Buxton, Ontario, Canada. While living in Buxton, which was inhabited entirely by fugitive slaves, Rapier experienced a religious conversion and decided to devote his life to helping his race. He later attended a normal school in Toronto, earning a teaching certificate in 1863, and returned to Buxton as an instructor.⁵ After following the events of the Civil War from Canada, Rapier returned to Nashville in late 1864. There he worked briefly as a reporter for a northern newspaper. With his father’s help, he purchased 200 acres of land in Maury County,

Tennessee, and, over time, became a successful cotton planter. A self-described loner, he never married.⁶

The end of the Civil War provided Rapier opportunities in politics. His first political experience was a keynote address at the Tennessee Negro Suffrage Convention in Nashville in 1865. His father’s illness and his own disillusionment with the restoration of former Confederates to power in the state government prompted Rapier’s return to Florence, where he rented 550 acres along the Tennessee River. His continued success as a planter allowed him to hire black tenant farmers. He also financed sharecroppers with low-interest loans. In March 1867, when freedmen could vote in Alabama, he called a local meeting to elect a black registrar. His father, John Rapier, Sr., won the election, and James Rapier was unanimously chosen to represent the county at the Alabama Republican convention. James Rapier served as the convention’s vice chairman and directed the platform committee. Although he sought equality among the races, Rapier emerged as a moderate politician. He did not ignore the fears of white Alabamians, and, consequently, opposed the total disfranchisement of former Confederates and the redistribution of seized land. Rapier recognized that a political alliance between Republican whites and blacks—though fragile—was necessary for the party’s success in Alabama.⁷ In October 1867, he served as a delegate to the Alabama constitutional convention, where he advanced the Republican platform as the only black man representing his district.

Rapier traveled to Washington, DC, in 1869 to attend the founding convention of the National Negro Labor Union (NNLU). The union organized to protect black laborers, to help sharecroppers, and to improve educational and economic opportunities for freedmen. The NNLU chose Rapier as its vice president in 1870. He opened



an Alabama branch in 1871, serving as president and executive chairman, and attended three more national conferences throughout his career. Rapier's increased name recognition allowed him to secure the Republican nomination for secretary of state in 1870. The first black man to run for statewide office in Alabama, he lost the position primarily because white Republicans remained uneasy about a black candidate.⁸ Rapier was appointed as a federal internal revenue assessor with the assistance of black Alabama Representative Benjamin Turner.⁹ By the early 1870s, Rapier was one of the most powerful black politicians in the state.

In August 1872, Alabama Republican Party leaders determined it would be nearly impossible to persuade native-born white Alabamians to vote for an African American in the upcoming congressional elections.¹⁰ Although constituents from a district representing the state's southeastern corner did not favor carpetbaggers, incumbent Charles Buckley, originally from New York, maintained a strong base among conservatives. Furthermore, Buckley represented a district in which freedmen were a minority, making up 44 percent of the population.¹¹ Defying party leaders, Rapier sought the district's Republican nomination. He used his recently founded newspaper, the *Montgomery Republican State Sentinel* (the state's first black-owned and -operated news source), to crusade for the Republican Party, freedmen's rights, and the re-election of President Ulysses S. Grant over Liberal Republican Horace Greeley.¹² Rapier hoped his newspaper would improve communication between the races in Alabama and campaigned on the promise that he would represent equally voters in his district, regardless of their race.¹³ At a late-summer convention, Rapier easily gained the Republican nomination, receiving 25 delegate votes to Buckley's five.¹⁴

In the general election, Rapier faced Democrat and Liberal Republican candidate William C. Oates, an ex-Confederate with a debilitating war wound. Rapier tirelessly traversed the district, speaking in 36 towns in as many days. He espoused his equal rights platform before

the crowds and promised to support national legislation providing land for tenant farmers.¹⁵ Congressionally enacted federal enforcement acts (the Ku Klux Klan bills) temporarily quelled Klan violence, making for a peaceful election.¹⁶ Rapier defeated Oates with 19,397 votes (55 percent), becoming Alabama's second black Representative in Congress.¹⁷ Heading to Washington, Rapier exuded confidence, declaring, "No man in the state wields more influence than I."¹⁸ Before the 43rd Congress convened in late 1873, he traveled to Vienna, Austria, as Alabama's commissioner to the Fifth International Exposition. Rapier noted that once he stepped onto foreign soil, "distinctions on account of my color ceased."¹⁹

In the 43rd Congress, Rapier soon earned a reputation as a prudent and diplomatic legislator. Though a forceful and outstanding orator, he rarely embellished his speeches with rhetorical flourishes. An observer in the gallery noted, "Mr. Rapier is an insatiable reader, which does not make him, fortunately, less original in expression of his own ideas. . . . He is a plain, forcible speaker."²⁰ Rapier's first act as a Representative, on January 5, 1874, was to introduce legislation designating Montgomery, Alabama, a federal customs collection site. The passage of the measure, which would boost the city's economy, was considered Rapier's greatest legislative achievement, and President Grant signed the bill into law on June 20, 1874. Rapier's subsequent attempts to gain federal funding for improvement projects in Alabama were less successful, and he became involved in economic debates that usually divided along sectional lines. Rapier voted in favor of railroad regulation and called for increased currency circulation, promoting economic conditions favorable to the agrarian south and west. These debates signaled a significant split between southern and northern Republicans that proved damaging in future national elections.²¹

Rapier's experience as a teacher and a labor organizer earned him a position on the Committee on Education and Labor, but he focused his first term on advancing the controversial Civil Rights Bill. Rapier hosted strategy meetings in his Washington home in an attempt to pass

the longstanding bill, which sought equal accommodations on public transportation and in lodging as well as equal education for blacks and whites. On June 9, 1874, Rapier spoke on the House Floor in favor of the bill, largely recounting his personal experiences with discrimination.²² Deeply disappointed with the eviscerated final measure that came before the House at the end of the 43rd Congress, Rapier, along with the other Alabama Republicans, voted nevertheless in its favor. The measure passed 162 to 99.²³

The Civil Rights Bill had not yet come to a vote in July 1874 when Rapier returned to Alabama in anticipation of a close re-election contest. Divisions among southeastern Alabama Republicans were his greatest obstacle. Earlier that year, two factions split over the case of a federal judge credited with enforcing laws against the Ku Klux Klan. Rapier refused to take sides, yet most of his supporters allied themselves with the judge. Meanwhile, emboldened by state and federal ambivalence, the Klan attained new power in Alabama. As the election approached, one conservative Democratic newspaper said, “We will accept no result but that of blood.”²⁴ White Alabama Democrats then proceeded to launch a campaign of economic coercion: Major business owners refused to hire black men or anyone who swore allegiance to the Republican Party.²⁵ Rapier approached the mounting opposition by running an aggressive campaign. He attempted to assuage white fears about the Civil Rights Bill by maintaining that the legislation did not require integrated schools or social equality but merely gave blacks equal opportunity and funding.²⁶ He traversed the state in a fashion reminiscent of his 1872 campaign, though threats from the Ku Klux Klan often disrupted his itinerary.²⁷ Rapier’s pleas to federal authorities to ensure a peaceful election, including a personal telegram to U.S. Attorney General George H. Williams, went unanswered.²⁸ In the chaos that ensued,

more than 100 people were killed and scores of black voters stayed away from the polls.²⁹ With the freedmen’s vote eliminated, Conservative Democrats swept the elections, taking two-thirds of the state offices. Attorney and former Confederate Army Major Jeremiah Williams edged out Rapier, taking 20,180 votes (51 percent) to Rapier’s 19,124. Rapier contested the election, without success, in the new Democratic House.³⁰

In 1876, Rapier moved to Lowndes County near Montgomery to run for a congressional seat for the only remaining district with a black majority (65 percent) after gerrymandering by the Democratic state legislature.³¹ Rapier defeated incumbent black Representative Jeremiah Haralson in the primary election, and Haralson subsequently ran in the general election as an Independent. While both Rapier and Haralson advocated civil rights, voter protection, and increased leadership roles for freedmen, their personalities were drastically different: Haralson was outspoken, brash, and rhetorical, whereas Rapier was prudent and polished.³² The two men split the black vote—Haralson won 8,675 votes (34 percent) and Rapier won 7,236 (28 percent)—handing the election to white Democrat Charles Shelley, who emerged with 9,655 votes (38 percent).³³

For his service, the Republican Party rewarded Rapier with an appointment as a collector for the Internal Revenue Service in July 1878. That same year, Rapier transformed the *Republican Sentinel* into the *Haynesville Times* and began a call for black emigration to the West—a movement he supported financially and by testifying before a Senate committee. In 1882 and 1883, Rapier fended off attempts by political enemies to remove him from his post as a collector, but failing health forced him to resign. He was appointed a disbursing officer for a federal building in Montgomery just before he died of pulmonary tuberculosis on May 31, 1883.

FOR FURTHER READING

Feldman, Eugene Pieter Romain. *Black Power in Old Alabama: The Life and Stirring Times of James T. Rapier, Afro-American Congressman from Alabama, 1839–1883* (Chicago: Museum of African American History, 1968).

“Rapier, James Thomas,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000064>.

Schweninger, Loren. “James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction,” in Howard Rabinowitz, ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

_____. *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Alabama Department of Archives and History

(Montgomery, AL) *Papers*: In the Eugene Feldman Papers, 1856–1978, 0.66 cubic feet. The papers collected by Eugene Feldman consist of photocopied letters written to the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 1882 in an unsuccessful effort to prevent James T. Rapier’s dismissal as an U.S. Revenue Tax Collector in the 2nd District of Alabama. Most of the original letters appear to be in the National Archives in Washington, DC. There is a small collection of letters (photocopies), circa 1856–1857, from James T. Rapier to his brother, John H. Rapier. The papers also contain drafts of an article by Eugene Feldman about James T. Rapier as well as the notes that he took for the article.

Howard University (Washington, DC), Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Papers*: In the Rapier Family Papers, 1836–1883, two linear feet. Correspondents include James Thomas Rapier.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (9 June 1874): 4782–4785.
- 2 Loren Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978): 16–18.
- 3 Following his wife's death, John Rapier had a relationship with a local slave named Lucretia. Forbidden by law to marry, the couple had five children, who lived in bondage because of their mother's status. The names of these children are not known.
- 4 Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 29–31; see also Robert L. Johns, "James T. Rapier," in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 994.
- 5 Other sources indicate that Rapier may have attended the University of Glasgow and Franklin College in Nashville during the Civil War, but this is not mentioned in major biographies about him, including Schweninger's *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*. See also Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 126.
- 6 Loren Schweninger, "Rapier, James Thomas," *American National Biography* 18 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 167–168 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 7 Loren Schweninger, "Rapier, James Thomas," *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 514 (hereinafter referred to as *DANB*). See also Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 123–124.
- 8 Schweninger, "Rapier, James Thomas," *ANB*.
- 9 Loren Schweninger, "James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction," in Howard Rabinowitz, ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982): 80.
- 10 Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 106.
- 11 Schweninger, "James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction": 82; Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 146.
- 12 Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 108. Liberal Republicans stood for states' rights, believing local governments were more effective at securing individual liberties. This platform was endorsed by southern Democrats.
- 13 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 128; Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 114.
- 14 Schweninger, "James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction": 81.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Schweninger, "Rapier, James Thomas," *ANB*.
- 17 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 223.
- 18 Quoted in Schweninger, "Rapier, James Thomas," *DANB*: 515.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Marie Le Baron, "Colored Congressmen: How the Enfranchised Race Is Represented in Washington," 12 April 1874, *St. Louis Daily Globe*: 3.
- 21 Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 123–125.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (9 June 1874): 4782–4785.
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 2nd sess. (4 February 1875): 1011.
- 24 Quoted in Schweninger, "James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction": 84.
- 25 Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 136.
- 26 Schweninger, "James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction": 85.
- 27 Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction*: 143–144.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 Schweninger, "James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction": 86.
- 30 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 230.
- 31 Schweninger, "James T. Rapier of Alabama and the Noble Cause of Reconstruction": 86; Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883*: 148–149. Parsons notes that a southwestern district also had a black majority, with 53 percent.
- 32 Schweninger, "Rapier, James Thomas," *ANB*.
- 33 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 236.