



Blanche Kelso Bruce

1841–1898

UNITED STATES SENATOR ★ 1875–1881
REPUBLICAN FROM MISSISSIPPI

A slave who became a successful plantation owner, Blanche Kelso Bruce was the second African American to serve in the United States Senate and the first to be elected to a full term. Though Bruce focused on protecting the rights of freedmen and other minorities, his life of social privilege in the nation's capital insulated him from the deprivations suffered by many of his black constituents. Bruce moved among elite circles of wealthy white politicians, including his close friends Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York and Senator Lucius Q. C. Lamar of Mississippi. "Mr. Bruce's conduct in the senate has been such as not to alienate himself from the Southern people," noted Lamar, who had drafted the Mississippi ordinance of secession, served as a Confederate diplomat, and returned to the U.S. Congress as an unabashed opponent of Reconstruction. "[Bruce] has not joined in the abusive warfare on the South that many of his Republican colleagues in the Senate Chamber have constantly pursued," Lamar added. "He is an intelligent man, and the best representative of his race in public life."¹

Blanche Bruce was born near Farmville, Virginia, on March 1, 1841. His mother, Polly Bruce, was a slave, and his father, Pettus Perkinson, was his mother's owner and the son-in-law of her deceased former owner, Lemuel Bruce. Bruce's first name was originally "Branch," but he changed it to "Blanche" as a teenager. For unexplained reasons, he later adopted the middle name "Kelso."² One of 11 children, Blanche Bruce was a personal servant to his half brother William Perkinson.³ Even though he was a slave, Bruce was accorded a status nearly equal to the Perkinson children's. Described by contemporaries as an eager learner, he studied with William's private tutor. But despite such benign treatment, Bruce escaped to Kansas during the Civil War and attempted to enlist in the Union Army. His application was refused, and he settled

in Lawrence to teach school. Returning to Hannibal, Missouri, near the war's end, he organized the state's first school for black children in 1864. Though he planned to attend Ohio's Oberlin College to study for his divinity degree, he could not afford the tuition.⁴ He spent the remainder of the 1860s working as a steamboat porter out of St. Louis on the Mississippi River, moving to Mississippi in 1869 to find more-lucrative opportunities.

Upon his arrival in Mississippi, Blanche Bruce witnessed a stump speech by Republican gubernatorial candidate James Alcorn, which inspired him to enter politics.⁵ On an 1870 trip to Jackson, the young, articulate Bruce caught the eye of white Republicans. That same year, the district military commander, General Adelbert Ames, appointed Bruce registrar of voters in Tallahatchie County. When the first postwar Mississippi legislature met in late 1870, Bruce, who was large and imposing, was elected sergeant at arms. In 1871, he was elected to the joint office of sheriff and tax collector of Bolivar County. The following year, the Republican state board of education appointed him county superintendent of education. In a singular achievement, Bruce turned the Bolivar County school system into one of the best in the state, creating a segregated but equally funded system that boasted the support of both blacks and whites.⁶ Bruce's wealth also increased. He invested in land, becoming a successful planter by the late 1870s. In 1872, he was named to the board of levee commissioners for a district containing three counties. The commissioners were empowered to raise revenue and build embankments in the Mississippi Delta region.

By the mid-1870s, Blanche K. Bruce was among the best-recognized politicians in the state.⁷ However, he faced a difficult decision when the state Republican Party split into two factions. A moderate, primarily white faction, led by then-Senator Alcorn, began ignoring African



SIMMIE KNOX
2001

Americans' demands for civil rights. Then Alcorn's political rival Governor Ames adopted a more radical stance, abandoning efforts to reach out to conservative whites. Although Bruce disagreed with the Radical Republicans, because he believed that political stability required biracial cooperation, he allied himself nonetheless with the Ames faction so as to support his fellow blacks. Governor Ames offered Bruce the position of lieutenant governor in 1873, but Bruce refused, eyeing the governor's vacant seat in the U.S. Senate.⁸ In January 1874, the state legislature met to nominate a U.S. Senator to fill Ames's unexpired term, and to select someone for a full six-year term beginning in the 44th Congress (1875–1877). Unlike Senator Hiram Revels before him, Bruce was selected to serve the full term primarily by black Republican colleagues, taking 52 of the 84 votes in the second ballot over Republican carpetbaggers, Representative George McKee and U.S. District Attorney G. Wiley Wells. The full legislature elected Bruce nearly unanimously on February 4, 1874.⁹

When Bruce arrived in the U.S. Senate Chamber on March 5, 1875, precedent called for his state's senior Senator to escort him to the podium, but Senator Alcorn snubbed the junior Senator because of Bruce's alliance with Governor Ames. Bruce walked up the aisle alone until Republican Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York offered to escort him. Thereafter Bruce had a powerful ally in Conkling, who coached him in Senate procedures and procured him assignments on influential committees, such as the Education and Labor, Manufactures, and Pensions committees.

Bruce remained quiet during the special session of the Senate, and concerned white Republicans feared he would shirk his responsibility to Mississippi by deferring to the Radical Republican leadership; black political leaders doubted Bruce would stand up for freedmen, who faced terrible violence from white supremacists implementing the Mississippi Plan.¹⁰ Bruce may have been following the time-honored tradition that a freshman remains studious and silent during his first few months in the Senate Chamber. He later noted that success in

the Senate required managing diplomacy: "The novelty of my position [compels me] to cultivate and exhibit my honorable associates a courtesy that would inspire reciprocal courtesy."¹¹

Bruce finally broke his silence on March 3, 1876, in defense of southern blacks, petitioning his colleagues to seat Pinckney B. S. Pinchback, a black Senator-elect from Louisiana and a personal friend. But Pinchback's political opponents questioned his selection by the state legislature due to corruption charges and despite Bruce's pleas, the Senate narrowly rejected Pinchback's claim to the seat.¹² Bruce followed this speech with a demand for an inquiry into the violent 1875 Mississippi gubernatorial election. The Senate passed a bill to investigate the political conditions in Mississippi during the previous election; however, the Democratic House did not act on the legislation.¹³

Bruce's advocacy for African Americans was most evident in issues affecting black war veterans. He was a staunch defender of black servicemen, promoting integration of the armed forces and fair treatment. On April 10, 1878, he unsuccessfully attempted to desegregate the U.S. Army, citing the U.S. Navy as a precedent.¹⁴ Two years later, Bruce delivered a speech asking the War Department to investigate the brutal hazing of black West Point cadet Johnson C. Whittaker. The following year, he supported legislation that prevented discrimination against the heirs to black soldiers' Civil War pensions.¹⁵ He also submitted a bill in 1879 to distribute money unclaimed by black Civil War soldiers to five African-American colleges. As the bill gained publicity, however, more claimants came forward and depleted the fund. The Senate Committee on Education and Labor eventually reported against the bill.¹⁶

Senator Bruce also favored the interests of other ethnic and racial minorities. During a debate on the Chinese Exclusion Act, with which he disagreed, Bruce became the first black Senator to preside over a Senate session, on February 14, 1879. Bruce also demanded more-equitable treatment for Native Americans. On April 6, 1880, he railed against federal management of Native

Americans in a Senate Floor speech. “Our Indian policy and administration seem to me to have been inspired and controlled by stern selfishness,” Bruce declared. Admonishing those who placed the goal of territorial expansion over honoring treaties, he continued, “We have in the effort to realize a somewhat intangible ideal, to wit, the preservation of Indian liberty and the administration and exercise of national authority. . . . The political system that underlies our Indian policy . . . is foreign in its character; the individuals and the system of laws are not American.”¹⁷

In April 1879, Bruce was appointed chairman of the Select Committee to Investigate the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company after its failure in 1874. Comprising three southern Democrats and three Republicans, including Bruce, the committee set out to investigate the more-than 600 pages of testimony and documentation collected at the bank’s closure to identify employees who were guilty of fraud and incompetence. The resultant Senate bill to reimburse former customers did not pass, but Bruce and his fellow Republicans succeeded in convincing the federal government to purchase the bank’s former Washington, DC, headquarters to provide the company with some capital.¹⁸

As a landowner, Bruce was interested in the financial health of property owners on the banks of the Mississippi River. He supported many internal improvements and financial incentives, including the creation of a Mississippi Valley railroad and a refund for cotton taxes levied during the Civil War. In the 45th Congress (1877–1879), he served as chairman of the Select Committee on the Mississippi River. In this position, he fought for federal funding to control flooding and advocated the creation of a channel and levee system for parts of the river’s edge. Bruce introduced a measure in 1879 to form the Mississippi River Improvement Association, a federally funded organization to control river flooding and protect waterfront property.¹⁹

Bruce’s favor among white conservative voters was not matched among his black constituents. Despite

Bruce’s political advocacy, Mississippi blacks questioned his commitment to the plight of freedmen in collapsing Reconstruction governments. Bruce’s privileged background often alienated him from his poorer constituents.²⁰ He and his wife, Josephine Beall Wilson of Ohio—the first black teacher in the Cleveland public schools and the daughter of a prominent mulatto dentist—whom he married on June 24, 1878, became fixtures in Washington, DC, high society. As a matter of policy, Bruce hesitated to support the westward migration of Black Americans from the South to Kansas and other Plains states. At the urging of his constituents, he introduced legislation that would assist destitute black farmers in Kansas by encouraging the federal government to issue more western land grants. His bill died in committee; however, he managed to appropriate the distribution of duty-free British cotton clothing to impoverished Kansas communities.²¹ Yet these efforts were judged lacking by the black community. Nor did the white establishment look favorably on Bruce. Despite Bruce’s moderation and political connections, rising “reform” politicians in power in Mississippi, who wished to recreate a “lily white” government, discounted him because of his race. When the Democratic Mississippi legislature gathered to select a new Senator in January 1880, Bruce did not even attempt a bid for a second term. The legislature chose Democrat James Z. George to succeed him.

After leaving the Senate, Bruce remained active in the Mississippi and national Republican parties.²² He briefly served as presiding officer at the 1880 Republican National Convention in Chicago, where he received eight votes for the nomination for Vice President. When the convention returned to Chicago in 1888, Bruce received 11 such votes. He also served as superintendent for black achievement at the World’s Cotton Exposition in New Orleans from 1884 to 1885 before returning to Washington to seek presidential patronage positions, his only hope of sustaining his political career. Though he rejected an offer to be Minister to Brazil because that country practiced slavery, Bruce received many endorsements for a post

in President James Garfield's Cabinet in 1881. Garfield ultimately passed him over, but Bruce obtained a prime position as register of the U.S. Treasury and remained there until 1885. In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison appointed him recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia; however, he left that office in 1893 after receiving an honorary LL.D. and joining the board of trustees at Howard University.²³ Bruce returned to the Treasury post in 1897 after being considered for a Cabinet position in President William McKinley's administration. He continued to reside in Washington until he succumbed to a kidney ailment due to complications from diabetes on March 17, 1898.²⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

"Bruce, Blanche Kelso," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=B000968>.

Graham, Lawrence Otis. *The Senator and the Socialite* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).

Harris, William C. "Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist," in Howard Rabinowitz ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Howard University (Washington, DC), Moorland–Spingarn Research Center. *Papers*: 1870–1891, 2.5 linear feet. The papers of Blanche Kelso Bruce consist of research notes, a bibliography, and other documents used by Sadie Daniel St. Clair to write a dissertation about Bruce. Includes correspondence with Bruce's family, constituents, and political allies of the State of Mississippi and letters in support of candidates for appointments and pensions.

Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC *Microfilm*: 1878–1890. The items consist of one letter (18 February 1878) from Blanche Bruce to Murat Halstead relating to the emigration of blacks from the southern United States to Liberia, a poem inscribed to Blanche Bruce's infant son, and a volume of news clippings relating chiefly to personal matters, especially to his wife, Josephine Bruce, and to Washington, DC, social life.

NOTES

- 1 William C. Harris, “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist,” in Howard Rabinowitz ed., *Southern Black Leaders of the Reconstruction Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982): 30.
- 2 Lawrence Otis Graham, *The Senator and the Socialite: The True Story of America’s First Black Dynasty* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006): 11; Grace E. Collins, “Blanche Kelso Bruce,” in Jessie Carney Smith ed., *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, Inc., 1999): 144 (hereinafter referred to as *NBAM*).
- 3 Bruce’s family situation was complicated. His half siblings through his mother and Lemuel Bruce included Sandy, Calvin, James, and Henry and a half sister whose name is not known. His full siblings through his mother and Pettis Perkinson included Howard, Edward, Robert, Eliza, and Mary. See Graham, *The Senator and the Socialite*: 10–11, 16–17.
- 4 Collins, “Blanche Kelso Bruce,” *NBAM*: 144.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 William C. Harris, “Bruce, Blanche Kelso,” *American National Biography* 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 779–780 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 7 Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 29.
- 8 Collins, “Blanche Kelso Bruce,” *NBAM*: 145.
- 9 Harris, “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist”: 11–12.
- 10 Ibid., 15.
- 11 Graham, *The Senator and the Socialite*: 68–70, 76; quoted in Harris, “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist”: 20.
- 12 Pinchback had recently been elected an At-Large Representative from Louisiana, and while his election was being contested, he was elected by the state legislature to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat. His selection for the Senate seat also was contested. He was rejected by both houses on charges of bribery and corruption. See Eric R. Jackson, “Pinchback, P. B. S.,” *ANB* 17: 527–529.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, Senate, 44th Cong., 1st sess. (31 March 1876): 2101–2105; Graham, *The Senator and the Socialite*: 80–81.
- 14 The Navy had long accepted blacks. Predictably, its race record suffered during the Jim Crow decades. Few blacks secured appointments to the Naval Academy at Annapolis, and none matriculated as officers. In the 1880s, black sailors were routinely denied promotions and assigned to perform menial tasks or labor. See David Osher’s essay “Race Relations and War,” *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 585.
- 15 *Congressional Record*, Senate, 46th Cong., 3rd sess. (10 February 1881): 1397–1398.
- 16 See S. 865, 46th Congress, 2nd session.
- 17 *Congressional Record*, Senate, 46th Cong., 2nd sess. (7 April 1880): 2195–2196. Bruce was supporting a bill selling federal lands to the Ute Indians in Colorado (S. 1509), which passed and was approved by President Rutherford B. Hayes in the 46th Congress (1879–1881).
- 18 Harris, “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist”: 22.
- 19 Samuel L. Shapiro, “Bruce, Blanche Kelso,” *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 74–76 (hereinafter referred to as *DANB*).
- 20 Harris, “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist”: 27, 33. See also Thomas C. Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).
- 21 Graham, *The Senator and the Socialite*: 116.
- 22 Harris, “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: Conservative Assimilationist”: 19.
- 23 Shapiro, “Bruce, Blanche Kelso,” *DANB*.
- 24 Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers*: 30. Bruce’s family continued his legacy of public service and focus on education. Josephine Bruce was the principal of the Tuskegee Institute and was active in the National Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. Bruce’s son, Roscoe Conkling Bruce, and his grandson, Roscoe Bruce, Jr., graduated with honors from Harvard University. The latter was embroiled in controversy when Harvard’s president refused to admit him into the dormitories in 1923.