



Robert Brown Elliott

1842–1884

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1871–1874
REPUBLICAN FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

With a legislative style more flamboyant and aggressive than his predecessors', and considerable oratorical skills, young, talented Robert Elliott regularly dazzled audiences. Possessing a strong, clear voice "suggestive of large experience in outdoor speaking," Elliott fought passionately to pass a comprehensive civil rights bill in his two terms in Congress. However, his fealty to the South Carolina Republican Party led him to resign his seat in the U.S. House of Representatives to serve the state government in Columbia.¹ Elliott's classical education, photographic memory, and obsession with politics impressed contemporary observers. "He knew the political condition of every nook and corner throughout the state," Elliott's law partner Daniel Augustus Straker commented. "[Elliott] knew every important person in every county, town or village and the history of the entire state as it related to politics."²

Robert Elliott was born on August 11, 1842, likely to West Indian parents in Liverpool, England.³ He received a public school education in England and learned a typesetter's trade. Elliott served in the British Navy, arriving on a warship in Boston around 1867. Historical records show that in late 1867 Robert Elliott lived in Charleston, South Carolina, where he was an associate editor for the *South Carolina Leader*, a freedmen's newspaper owned by future Representative Richard H. Cain. Elliott married Grace Lee, a free mulatto from Boston or Charleston, sometime before 1870. The couple had no children.⁴

Robert Elliott was intellectually gifted and well-educated. He often quoted classical literature and demonstrated facility with several languages. He quickly dove into Reconstruction-Era Republican politics in his new South Carolina home, emerging as a leading figure at the 1868 state constitutional convention. One of 78 black delegates at the convention, he advocated compulsory

public education (although he opposed school integration) and helped defeat the imposition of a poll tax and a literacy test for voters. At the state Republican convention that year, he was nominated for lieutenant governor, but dropped out of the race after finishing third on the first ballot.⁵ Later in 1868, while serving as the only black member of the Barnwell County board of commissioners, Elliott was elected to the state house of representatives, where he remained until 1870. He almost was elected speaker—placing second on the balloting—and he went on to receive influential assignments as chairman of the committee on railroads and chairman of the committee on privileges and elections. During his tenure in the state assembly, Elliott used his keen intelligence and ambition to study law and was admitted to the South Carolina bar in September 1868. In 1870, Republican Governor Robert K. Scott appointed Elliott the assistant adjutant general of South Carolina, giving him authority to raise the state militia to protect black citizens from the Ku Klux Klan. Shortly thereafter, Elliott came to believe Scott was using him for his own political advantage, and he resigned later that year. Nevertheless, he served on the South Carolina Republican executive committee throughout his career.

In October 1870, Republicans in a west-central South Carolina congressional district nominated Robert Elliott over incumbent Solomon L. Hoge to run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. The district included the capital, Columbia, and had only a slight black majority. The seat was once held by Representative Preston Brooks, notorious for his caning assault on Senator Charles Sumner in 1856. Elliott faced Union Reform Party candidate John E. Bacon, the son of a prominent, aristocratic, low country family. The election was contentious. Bacon accused Elliott of using his position on the committee on railroads in the state legislature to line his own pockets.⁶ Though the



New York Times predicted Bacon's victory, Elliott soundly defeated him with 60 percent of the vote.⁷ He was sworn in to the 42nd Congress (1871–1873) on March 4, 1871.

White colleagues received Elliott coolly. His dark skin came as a shock, as the two other African Americans on the floor, Joseph Rainey and Jefferson Long, were light-skinned mulattos. Described as the first “genuine African” in Congress, Elliott seemed to embody the new political opportunities—and southern white apprehensions—ushered in by emancipation. “I shall never forget [my first day in Congress],” Elliott later recalled. “I found myself the center of attraction. Everything was still.”⁸ Furthermore, his politics were more radical than his African-American colleagues’, and his unwavering stance for black civil rights made many Representatives of both parties wary of his intentions. Elliott was given a position on the Committee on Education and Labor, where he served during both of his terms.

The current of suspicion surrounding his arrival did not erode Elliott's natural confidence. He gave his maiden speech just 10 days after his swearing-in, challenging the Amnesty Bill, which re-established the political rights of nearly all former Confederates, and quickly followed that speech with another supporting the Ku Klux Klan Bill, aimed at curbing the terrorist activities of the clandestine organization.

Rising racial violence in his home state stirred Elliott to speak. Just before Christmas 1870, a white whiskey peddler allegedly was killed by a group of drunk, black militiamen in the town of Union Courthouse, South Carolina. Thirteen men were arrested in connection with the crime, but before they were tried, the Ku Klux Klan raided several jails, executing the suspects. The Klansmen subsequently posted a notice on the Union Courthouse jail door justifying the lynchings and warning other African Americans in the state. Elliott argued for a delay in the restoration of political rights to ex-Confederates and pleaded with Congress to protect the rights of African Americans and other loyal southerners from terror organizations. Referring to the violence at Union

Courthouse, Elliott told his colleagues that “to relieve those men of their disabilities at this time would be regarded by the loyal men of the South as an evidence of weakness of this great Government, and of an intention on the part of this Congress to foster the men who today are outraging the good and loyal people of the South.”⁹ Elliott's arguments against the Amnesty Bill ultimately failed, as the measure passed the following year.

Elliott's efforts to enact legislation to weaken the Klan were more successful. In his April 1 speech, he read the letter posted by the Klansmen at the Union Courthouse jail, following it with words about the prejudice against his race: “It is custom, sir, of Democratic [newspapers] to stigmatize the negroes of the South as being in a semi-barbarous condition; but pray tell me, who is the barbarian here, the murderer or the victim? I fling back in the teeth of those who make it this most false and foul aspersion upon the negro of the southern States.”¹⁰ The Third Ku Klux Klan Bill, which reinforced freedmen's voting rights, passed and was signed into law three weeks later. The following October, President Ulysses S. Grant used the powers granted him by the bill to suspend *habeas corpus* in nine southern states, facilitating the prosecution of Klansmen. Elliott felt his life was in danger, and before leaving for Columbia the following day, he wrote his wife with instructions in case of his death.¹¹ Also in the 42nd Congress, Elliott attempted in May 1872 to gain appropriations to pull South Carolina out of its postwar debt.

In October 1872, Elliott was re-elected practically unopposed, garnering 93 percent of the vote against two weak Democrats, W. H. McCaw and Samuel McGovan.¹² In November, Elliott attempted to become the first African American to win a full term in the U.S. Senate. The state general assembly voted 73 to 27 to elect his opponent, carpetbagger John J. Patterson, but two hours later, Patterson was arrested and charged with bribing a number of state legislators. (Elliott claimed he was offered between \$10,000 and \$15,000 to drop out of the race.)¹³ The corrupt South Carolina government later dropped the

charges, and Patterson was duly elected. Elliott returned to his House seat in December 1873 for the opening of the 43rd Congress (1873–1875) and received an additional assignment on the Committee on the Militia.

During his second term, Elliott worked to help pass Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner’s Civil Rights Bill, to eliminate discrimination from public transportation, public accommodations, and schools. Elliott gained national attention for a speech rebuffing opponents of the bill, who argued that federal enforcement of civil rights was unconstitutional. Responding to former Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens of Georgia, who had been re-elected to the House, Elliott reaffirmed his belief in the right and duty of Congress to legislate against discrimination. He concluded by evoking the sacrifices made during the Civil War and asserting that its true purpose was to obtain civil rights for all Americans, including women, who experienced discrimination. Elliott undoubtedly drew upon a large reserve of personal experience with racism. Like other African-American Representatives, he faced discrimination almost daily, particularly in restaurants and on public transportation.¹⁴ Before a packed House, Elliott stated his universal support for civil rights, “I regret, sir, that the dark hue of my skin may lend a color to the imputation that I am controlled by motives personal to myself in my advocacy of this great measure of national justice. The motive that impels me is restricted to no such boundary, but is as broad as your Constitution. I advocate it because it is right.”¹⁵ Elliott’s youthful appearance and the “harmony of his delivery” contrasted sharply with those of the elderly Stephens, who, confined to a wheelchair, dryly read a prepared speech.¹⁶ The *Chicago Tribune* published a glowing review, noting that “fair-skinned men in Congress . . . might learn something from this black man.”¹⁷

Elliott returned to South Carolina on February 6, 1874, although Congress was still in session. His well-publicized speeches left him a hero among black constituents, but Elliott realized that the corruption in the state’s Republican Party was allowing the Democrats

to gain power and endangering the prospects of black politicians. After the death of Senator Sumner in early March 1874, Elliott delivered a famous eulogy at Boston’s Faneuil Hall. Shortly afterward, he returned to South Carolina and resigned his House seat on November 1, 1874. Wishing to remain close to the South Carolina government, Elliott subsequently ran for and won a seat in the state general assembly.¹⁸

The general assembly elected Elliott speaker of the house, (he succeeded South Carolina’s first black speaker, Samuel Lee). After serving in that position until 1876, Elliott was elected state attorney general in a bitter and controversial race; however, the collapse of the state’s Reconstruction government the following year and the withdrawal of federal troops forced him out of office in May 1877. After leaving his post, Elliott founded a law practice, but it attracted few customers. In 1879, he accepted an appointment as a special customs inspector for the Treasury Department in Charleston, South Carolina. On a trip to Florida, he contracted malaria, which severely undermined his health for the remainder of his life. Elliott remained active in politics, however, working on Treasury Secretary John Sherman’s campaign for President, seconding his nomination and managing his black delegates at the 1880 Republican National Convention. In January 1881, Elliott was part of a black delegation that met with President James Garfield to protest the lack of civil and political rights in the South. In May of that year, the Treasury Department transferred him to New Orleans, uprooting him from his home and causing him great personal anguish. Elliott was dismissed as a Treasury inspector in 1882. Unable to afford to return to South Carolina, he started another law practice in New Orleans. Robert Elliott lapsed into poverty before his death on August 9, 1884.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Elliott, Robert Brown,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=E000128>.

Lamson, Peggy. *The Glorious Failure: Black Congressman Robert Brown Elliott and the Reconstruction in South Carolina* (New York: Norton, 1973).

NOTES

- 1 “Washington,” 2 April 1871, *Chicago Tribune*: 2.
- 2 Quoted in Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 70. The context of the quote is unclear.
- 3 The circumstances of Robert Brown Elliott’s early life are enigmatic. He claimed he was born in Boston and attended public schools in England, graduating with honors from Britain’s prestigious Eton College in 1859. He further asserted that he had worked for a famous London barrister before returning to the United States in 1861 to join the Union Navy. Elliott later attributed a lifelong limp to a battle wound. Other evidence indicates that his parents were originally from South Carolina and that the Elliott family escaped slavery on the Underground Railroad to a northern state. Still other sources suggest Elliott was born in the West Indies and spent his early years there. Elliott’s version of his origins cannot be corroborated, and recent scholarship indicates that the bright and ambitious young man may have invented his American citizenship and embellished his credentials in 1867 to establish his eligibility and credibility as a candidate for political office. Elliott’s mysterious background is discussed at length by his chief biographer. See Peggy Lamson *The Glorious Failure: Black Representative Robert Brown Elliott and the Reconstruction in South Carolina* (New York: Norton, 1973): 22–33. See also Peggy Lamson “Elliott, Robert Brown,” *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 210–211 (hereinafter referred to as *DANB*). The most recent scholarship accepts Lamson’s evidence of Elliott’s background. See Stephen Middleton ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 85–86.

- 4 The identity of Elliott’s wife also is mysterious. Though Elliott addressed Grace L. Elliott in a letter as “my dear wife,” other sources indicate Elliott’s wife was Nancy Fat. Others conclude that Nancy Fat was Elliott’s mistress; see Lamson, *The Glorious Failure*: 31–33.
- 5 Howard N. Rabinowitz, “Elliott, Robert Brown,” *American National Biography* 7 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 434–436.
- 6 Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 70.
- 7 “Political,” 18 October 1870, *New York Times*: 5; Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 220.
- 8 Quoted in Lamson, *The Glorious Failure*: 122.
- 9 *Congressional Globe*, House, 42nd Cong., 1st sess. (14 March 1871): 102–103.
- 10 *Congressional Globe*, House, 42nd Cong., 1st sess. (1 April 1871): 392.
- 11 Lamson, *The Glorious Failure*: 131–132.
- 12 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 226.
- 13 Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers*: 70; Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 73.
- 14 Lamson, *The Glorious Failure*: 120–121.
- 15 *Congressional Globe*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (6 January 1874): 407–410.
- 16 Lamson, *The Glorious Failure*: 175–176; “Congress,” 7 January 1874, *New York Times*: 1.
- 17 “Representative Elliott’s Speech,” 8 January 1874, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 4.
- 18 Lamson, “Elliott, Robert Brown,” *DANB*.



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HUE OF MY SKIN MAY LEND A
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MEASURE OF NATIONAL JUSTICE,”
ELLIOTT SAID OF HIS SUPPORT
FOR THE CIVIL RIGHTS BILL
OF 1875. “THE MOTIVE THAT
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NO SUCH BOUNDARY, BUT IS AS
BROAD AS YOUR CONSTITUTION.
I ADVOCATE IT BECAUSE
IT IS RIGHT.”