



Richard Harvey Cain

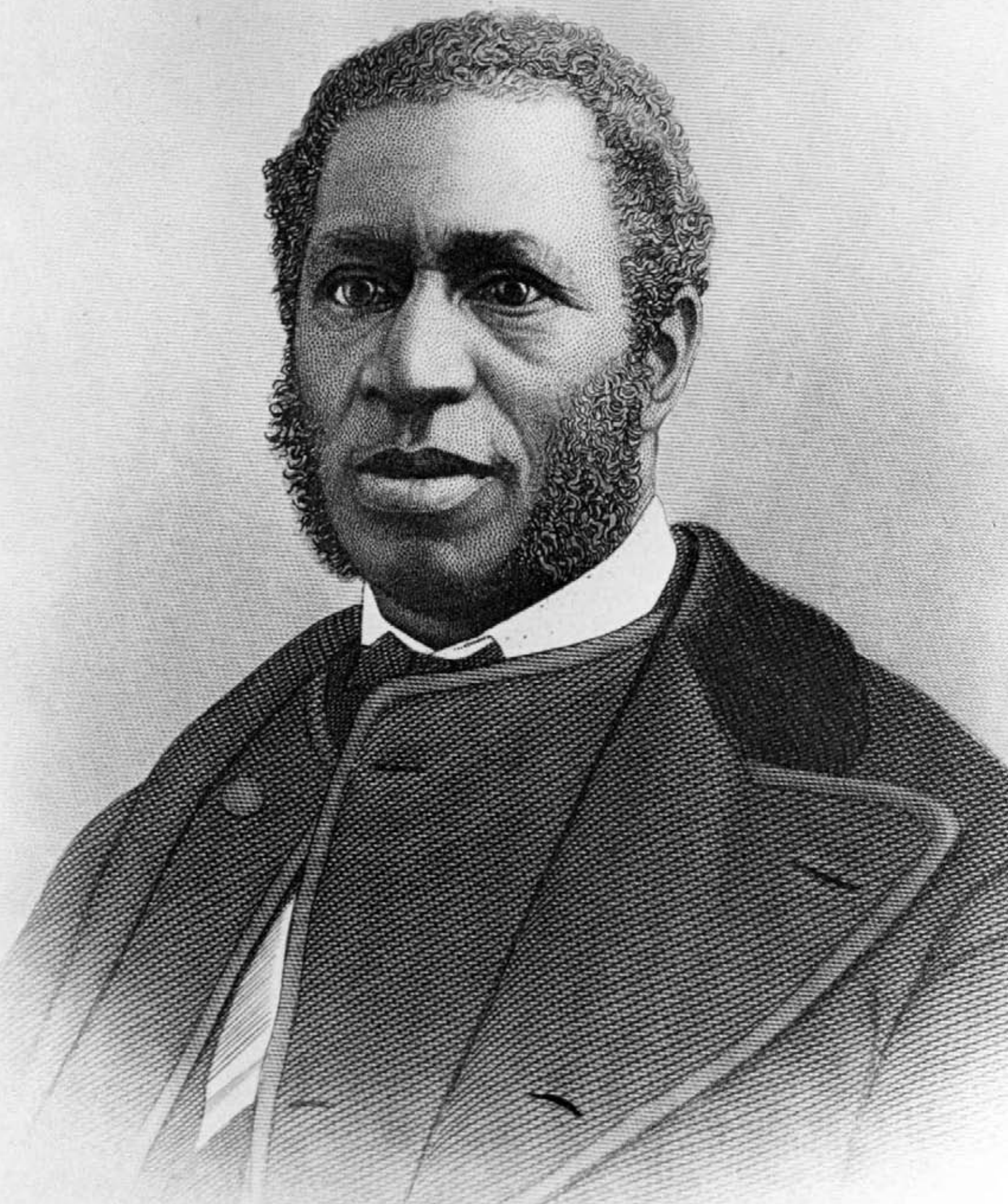
1825–1887

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1873–1875; 1877–1879
REPUBLICAN FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

Born into freedom, Richard Cain was a pastor, a newspaper editor, and an entrepreneur, making his mark as a writer and a land speculator before being elected to the U.S. House for two nonconsecutive terms. During the 43rd Congress (1873–1875), Cain used his considerable oratorical skills and wit to defend the education clause in the Civil Rights Bill of 1875. He displayed a rich sense of humor, mocking southern white Representatives who pronounced African Americans incapable of learning. Addressing Representative William Robbins of North Carolina, Cain retorted, “The gentleman . . . states that the Negro race is the world’s stage actor—the comic dancer all over the land; that he laughs and he dances. . . . Now he dances as an African; then he crouched as a slave.”¹ Amid deteriorating conditions for southern blacks at the end of Reconstruction, Cain promoted African-American immigration to the West African colony of Liberia in the 45th Congress (1877–1879).

Richard Harvey Cain was born to free parents on April 12, 1825, in Greenbrier County, Virginia (now West Virginia). His Cherokee mother and black father moved with their son to Gallipolis, Ohio, in 1831. Living in a “free state” afforded Cain an education; he learned to read and write in Sunday school classes. He also worked on steamboats along the Ohio River. In 1844, Cain entered the Methodist ministry; his first assignment was in Hannibal, Missouri. In 1848, frustrated by the Methodists’ segregated practices, he transferred to the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Cain then served as a pastor in Muscatine, Iowa, where he was elected a deacon in 1859. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, he was studying at Wilberforce University in Ohio, one of the first American colleges founded by black men. Cain claimed that he and 115 other Wilberforce students attempted to enlist but were turned away by the Ohio governor.²

In 1861, Richard Cain was assigned to serve as pastor at the Bridge Street Church in Brooklyn, New York, where he quickly became involved in politics. As a delegate to a national black convention held in Syracuse, New York, in 1864, he advocated universal manhood suffrage. After the war, the AME Church assigned Cain to the historic Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The state government had dissolved the congregation in 1822 because of a slave revolt, but under Cain’s leadership the congregation swelled to the largest in the state by 1871. Cain established himself as a writer at the 1865 Charleston Colored People’s Convention, penning “Address to the People of South Carolina” in which he set forth some of his lifelong political positions, including his advocacy of land grants for freedmen. To disseminate his views to a larger audience, he founded the *South Carolina Leader* newspaper in 1866 (renamed the *Missionary Record* in 1868). Cain hired future black Representatives Robert Elliott and Alonzo Ransier as associate editors. The exposure he gained from his church and his newspaper helped jump-start Cain’s political career. Under Cain, Emanuel’s congregation became “one of the strongest political organizations in the state,” and its support base grew through the editorial pages of the *Missionary Record*.³ Cain first served in South Carolina as a delegate to the state constitutional convention in 1868. He was elected to the state senate that same year, heading a commission to investigate South Carolina state senators who voted against the ratification of the 14th Amendment. After an unsuccessful campaign for re-election to the state senate in 1870, Cain was named chair of the party’s Charleston branch, and he set his sights on national politics. Known widely as “Daddy Cain,” he had firmly established his credentials as a paternal champion of African-American civil rights and social advancement.⁴



While further entrepreneurial endeavors garnered Cain important political connections, they also invited scrutiny and unwanted attention. In 1869, he supported enacting a state land commission and petitioning the U.S. Congress to fund it with a \$1 million loan from the Freedmen's Bank.⁵ When the commission proved corrupt and ineffective, Cain purchased large tracts of farmland 20 miles outside Charleston in 1871 and attempted to sell them exclusively to freedmen. He established the Ebenezer AME Church on the property, and a new community (Lincolntown) grew out of its congregation.⁶ Financiers foreclosed on the project when Cain was unable to meet the mortgage payments. He was later indicted for obtaining money from buyers under false pretenses, but the case never went to trial. His participation in Reconstruction-Era politics was also attended by personal risk; white supremacy groups harassed him, and his daughter would later recall, "We... lived in constant fear at all times."⁷

The 1872 campaign in South Carolina signaled a new reform movement in state politics, particularly following the revelation of corruption on the part of outgoing Governor Robert K. Scott.⁸ As a longtime advocate for the removal of corrupt politicians from state government and a cofounder of the Honest Government League, Cain was an attractive candidate for statewide and national office.⁹ After failing to obtain the nomination for lieutenant governor, Cain sought an At-Large seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. He defeated his nearest opponent, Independent Democrat Lewis E. Johnson, by more than 38,000 votes, garnering 71 percent of the total in a four-way race.¹⁰

Upon being sworn into the 43rd Congress, Cain was assigned to the influential Committee on Agriculture as a nod to his state's large farming population. He spent his first term in Congress, however, focusing on the long-awaited Civil Rights Bill. First introduced in 1870, the bill, which called for equal services and accommodations for all races, had been diluted by amendments restricting its scope. Cain, an assertive and entertaining orator, made

two major speeches and on several occasions spoke on the House Floor in support of the legislation. Both of Cain's significant floor speeches, delivered in January 1873, identified the civil rights legislation as the final battle of the Civil War and a fatal blow to slavery, fulfilling "the great mission . . . of giving all the people equal rights."¹¹ Cain touched on race relations in the South as well as discrimination related to public transportation, hotel accommodations, and education. He attempted to dispel the well-worn argument that civil rights legislation would destroy the possibility of good relations between southern whites and African Americans. On January 10, he said, "Now I am at a loss to see how the friendship of our white friends can be lost to us by simply saying we should be permitted to enjoy the rights enjoyed by other citizens... We do not want any discrimination. I do not ask for any legislation for colored people of this country that is not applied to the white people. All that we ask is equal laws, equal legislation, and equal rights. . . ."¹² Cain also made a case for the contributions of blacks to southern society, observing that black men provided essential labor for the economy and fulfilled many skilled tasks. Cain noted that, "the carpenters, the machinists, the engineers—nearly all the mechanics" in the South were black.¹³

A distilled version of the beleaguered civil rights legislation passed on February 4, 1875, with Cain reluctantly accepting an amendment striking the clause that would have integrated public schools.¹⁴ With the adjournment of the 43rd Congress one month later, Cain's At-Large seat was eliminated due to reapportionment. He did not seek renomination in his home district, which included the large black populations of Charleston, Georgetown, and the Sea Islands, then represented by black Representative Joseph Rainey, but returned to his ministry and local political activity in Charleston.¹⁵

Cain did not remain out of elective office for long, however. In 1876, he accepted the Republican nomination for a seat in a new district mapped by the Republican state legislature and favorable to the election of its partisans. Cain's new district, which swept from low-country

Charleston to neighboring inland Orangeburg County, was more than 65 percent black.¹⁶ Although Cain defeated his opponent, Michael O'Connor, by more than 8,000 votes (taking 62 percent), that Election Day was one of the most tumultuous in South Carolina history. Violence and corruption wracked the state. The chaos drew national attention when South Carolina, along with two other states, provided two sets of electoral votes for each of the presidential candidates, Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden.¹⁷ Citing election irregularities, O'Connor contested Cain's victory. He challenged Cain's credentials, signed by South Carolina Secretary of State Henry E. Hayne, a black man later declared by the state government to be a fugitive from the law. O'Connor also argued that the state canvassers, who had met in secret to count the final votes, were candidates on the Republican ticket along with Cain and thus biased.¹⁸ On October 16, 1877, the second day of the 45th Congress, Cain defended himself against these claims, noting that the secretary who had signed his credentials also had signed those of four other South Carolina Representatives of different races and political parties.¹⁹ That same day the House voted 181 to 89 to seat Cain, and he was assigned to the Committee on Private Claims. O'Connor again tried to unseat him a year later; however, the Elections Committee unanimously supported Cain. The House upheld his election for the second time in an unrecorded vote on May 8, 1878.²⁰

The provisions that had been gutted from the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 were at the top of Cain's agenda when he returned to Congress, and he introduced a bill requiring the federal government to set aside monies from the sale of public lands to fund public education. The money would be apportioned to the states based on population. Cain did not use racial or partisan arguments to make his case; providing federal census statistics showing that school attendance was low among the poor of all races and regions, Cain declared, "The education of the nation is paramount, and should not be neglected. We should recognize the absolute necessity of elevating our

citizens of whatever class or condition from ignorance, from degradation, from superstition, from pauperism, from crime. It is an accepted axiom, I believe everywhere, that the more intelligent the citizen is the better citizen he is."²¹ Although Cain gained the support of several of his colleagues, including Representative Rainey, his proposal never made it out of the Committee on Education and Labor.

Cain's frustration with the collapse of Reconstruction shaped his policy during his second term. He defended the controversial order of South Carolina carpetbagger Governor Daniel Chamberlain to employ military protection for voters in the 1876 election and argued against cutting military budgets, to ensure domestic peace and protect western pioneers from Indian uprisings.²² Concerned with the erosion of black civil rights in the South, Cain also reconsidered his initial reluctance to support emigration to Liberia.²³ Citing growing black disillusionment in the South, he began to advocate legislation to aid that cause.²⁴ On March 11, 1878, Cain submitted a bill to establish routes for mail and passenger ships to the West African colony. Although his proposal never left the Committee on Commerce, Cain became a member of the Liberian Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company in 1877.

Representative Cain's politics became more radical as his term progressed. He joined former black Representatives Robert De Large and Alonso Ransier from South Carolina in supporting the movement of black nationalist Martin Delany to gain power for blacks in the federal government. Cain cooperated with Delany, castigating white Republican leaders who favored light-skinned candidates and scorning mulatto men who endorsed this discrimination. He argued that this practice splintered the Republican Party.²⁵ He also advocated violent retaliation against the Ku Klux Klan and the like-minded Red Shirts of South Carolina.²⁶ Such maverick positions cost Cain the Republican nomination in 1878. Instead the party nominated a local white man, Edmund W. M. Mackey, who went on to lose a close election to Cain's former opponent Michael O'Connor.



★ RICHARD HARVEY CAIN ★

After leaving Congress, Cain distanced himself from South Carolina politics. In 1880, the AME Church elected Cain to serve as bishop in the Texas–Louisiana Conference. He cofounded Paul Quinn College in Waco, Texas, and served as its president until July 1884. Cain then returned to Washington, DC to serve as bishop of the AME Conference with jurisdiction in the mid-Atlantic and New England states, overseeing his new post from the nation’s capital, until he died on January 18, 1887.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Cain, Richard Harvey,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000022>.

Lewis, Ronald L. “Cultural Pluralism and Black Reconstruction: The Public Career of Richard H. Cain,” *Crisis* 85 (February 1978): 57–60.

NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (24 January 1874): 901–903.
- 2 Governor William Dennison likely rejected the black volunteers from Wilberforce. Cain stated that he enlisted in the Union Army when African Americans were permitted to fight, in 1862, but his service cannot be verified. See Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 88.
- 3 Quoted in Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861–1877* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1965): 206.
- 4 Peggy Lamson, “Cain, Richard Harvey,” *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: Norton, 1982): 85.
- 5 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 88; Thomas C. Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977): 131.
- 6 Bo Peterson, “Lincolntonville: Church Remains Town’s Cornerstone,” 22 February 2003, *Charleston Post and Courier*: 1A.
- 7 Quoted in Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 36. Cain’s daughter’s name is not known.
- 8 Williamson, *After Slavery*: 399.
- 9 C. G. W., “Cain, Richard Harvey,” *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1973): 404 (hereinafter referred to as *DAB*); Williamson, *After Slavery*: 393.
- 10 Michael J. Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998): 226. There is no evidence that Cain faced violence or irregularities in his election, as did some of his colleagues.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (10 January 1874): 565–567.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (24 January 1874): 901–903.
- 14 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (3 February 1875): 982.
- 15 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986): 213.
- 16 Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1843–1883*: 213. This percentage was estimated using data provided by Parsons. Though Parsons mentions the redistricting of South Carolina for the 1874 election, he omits a second redistricting for the 1876 election. This second change in district lines eliminated Lexington County from Cain’s district. Parsons includes Lexington County, whose population was only 35 percent black, in his calculation. See also Kenneth Martis, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress: 1789–1989* (New York: Macmillan, 1989): 128–131.
- 17 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988): 573–575.
- 18 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 94.
- 19 *Congressional Record*, House, 45th Cong., 1st sess. (16 October 1877): 68. Representatives Joseph Rainey and Robert Smalls were black Republicans, and Representatives David Aiken and John Evins were white Democrats.
- 20 *Congressional Record*, House, 45th Cong., 2nd sess. (8 May 1878): 3274.
- 21 *Congressional Record*, House, 45th Cong., 3rd sess. (23 January 1879): 684.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 45th Cong., 2nd sess. (22 May 1878): 3683.
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 43rd Cong., 1st sess. (24 January 1874): 901–903. In this earlier speech on the House Floor Cain declared, “We [Black Americans] feel that we are part and parcel of this great nation; as such, as I said before, we propose to stay here and solve this problem of whether the black race and the white race can live together in this country.”
- 24 Quoted in Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers*: 36.
- 25 William C. Hine, “Cain, Richard Harvey,” *American National Biography* 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 188–189 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 26 C. G. W., “Cain, Richard Harvey,” *DAB*; Hine, “Cain, Richard Harvey,” *ANB*; Terry L. Seip, *The South Returns to Congress: Men, Economic Measures, and Intersectional Relationships, 1868–1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983): 76–77.