

Henry Plummer Cheatham

1857–1935

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1889–1893
REPUBLICAN FROM NORTH CAROLINA

A lifelong proponent of education and of the recognition of African-American achievements in the post-emancipation years, Henry Cheatham won back the “Black Second” district in eastern North Carolina, recapturing the seat formerly held by Representatives John Hyman and James O’Hara. “Politically, I am a Republican,” he told the *Washington Post* in 1889. “I was elected to Congress by the Republican party and upon Republican principles and there is no question about my not cheerfully supporting the party.”¹ However, Cheatham’s political loyalty was tempered by his increasing frustration with the party’s ambivalence toward Black Americans.

Henry Plummer Cheatham was born into slavery in Henderson, North Carolina, on December 27, 1857. His mother was a plantation-house slave, and his father was rumored to be a prominent local white man. Cheatham was emancipated at the end of the Civil War at age eight, and because of his relative youth, his formal education was more extensive than most of his future black congressional colleagues’. Cheatham attended Henderson Public School, a makeshift school for free black children. With financial help from a white friend, Robert A. Jenkins, Cheatham attended North Carolina’s first college for African Americans, Shaw University Normal School in Raleigh, earning his A.B. degree in 1882. In 1887, the school awarded him an honorary master’s degree.² While studying at Shaw, he met his first wife, fellow student Louise Cherry, who later became a music teacher. The Cheathams had three children: Charles, Mamie, and Henry Plummer, Jr. After Louise Cherry Cheatham died in 1899, Henry Cheatham married Laura Joyner, with whom he had three more children: Susie, Richard, and James.

Initially an educator, Cheatham soon found himself more interested in politics. In 1883, he was named principal of North Carolina’s Plymouth Normal School.

A year later, he was elected register of deeds for Vance County. Cheatham made valuable political connections during his two terms as register. In 1887, he founded and incorporated an orphanage for black children in Oxford, North Carolina, and in 1888, he made his first bid for Congress.

By the late 1880s, the Democratic-controlled North Carolina state legislature had tightened suffrage laws, greatly restricting black voters. Jim Crow statutes had disfranchised nearly 60 percent of the voting base in the “Black Second,” a predominantly African-American district that snaked along coastal sections of the northeastern part of the state.³ A split in the African-American vote enabled “Black Second” Democrat Furnifold Simmons, to defeat incumbent Representative James O’Hara and another black candidate, Israel Abbott, in 1886.

The initial stages of the 1888 campaign pointed to a similar outcome. Simmons’s chances for re-election were further strengthened by continued infighting among local Republicans. At a tumultuous Republican district convention, Cheatham topped 10 other candidates, including former Representatives John Hyman and James O’Hara.⁴ Though he was eventually nominated without opposition, eight delegates abstained, indicating a tepid base of support. Black candidate George Allen Mebane used his early popularity at the district convention to run against Cheatham in the general election, claiming he had the backing of the Republican executive committee.⁵ Cheatham declined Mebane’s invitation to debate, refusing to recognize any other party candidate for the seat, and each candidate spent the summer of 1888 blaming the other for sustained Republican divisions. The rivalry continued unabated until October, when Mebane suddenly withdrew and asked his supporters to back Cheatham. Though Republicans praised him for acting for the sake





★ HENRY PLUMMER CHEATHAM ★

of party unity, Democrats spread rumors that Cheatham supporters had bought off Mebane.⁶ Simmons remained strategically neutral on racial issues, though as a Senator he would emerge as an extremist in the white supremacy movement. He also retained a relatively large African-American following until a few weeks before the election, but his partisans were not as cautious.⁷ Unable to depend on the divided vote that aided Simmons in 1886, district Democrats used white North Carolinians' racial fears against Cheatham.⁸ The black candidate fought back, warning black voters that Democrats wanted to return them to slavery.⁹ Cheatham defeated Simmons by a narrow 51 percent (a margin of roughly 600 votes).¹⁰ Across the state, Republicans had their best showing since 1872, claiming three of the state's nine congressional seats.¹¹

Cheatham arrived in Washington nearly a year early to familiarize himself with the legislative process. When the House organized itself in December 1889, he was the only black Member in the 51st Congress (1889–1891).¹² Reactions to his arrival were curious, but favorable. Friendly newspapers emphasized his strong educational background, which earned him an assignment on the Committee on Education.¹³ Cheatham also served on the Committee on Expenditures on Public Buildings in the 51st Congress. The North Carolina Representative was a behind-the-scenes legislator, focusing on his committee work and giving few speeches on the House Floor.¹⁴

Cheatham proved loyal to some of the principal Republican monetary policies of the early 1890s. He favored the McKinley Tariff, which raised duties an average of 45 percent to protect local manufacturers from foreign competitors.¹⁵ He noted that “the leading incentive of the great tariff system of America has always been to stimulate and protect home industries, and this has become the spirit of the age.”¹⁶ However, his only speech in the first session opposed a protective tax on compound lard made from pig fat and cottonseed oil. Cheatham explained that destitute farmers in his district began producing the hybrid lard after a fully animal-based product became too expensive due to an epidemic that had wiped out North Carolina's hog

population. “Our people are ... anxiously waiting to see if their friends in the North will take away from them the last blessing they have in the form of cheap food,” he pleaded with his colleagues, “a blessing, let me say, which materially affects the colored people's condition at the South.”¹⁷

Cheatham's black constituents faced unraveling economic and political conditions. During his first term, the teetering economy in eastern North Carolina plunged into depression. The prices of two staple crops, cotton and corn, dropped dramatically, squeezing small farmers.¹⁸ Poor economic prospects led to a decline in the black voter base in Cheatham's district. By 1890, many emigrated from the economically depressed Carolinas in search of better opportunities in Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi. In an attempt to stem the flight, Cheatham returned to his district in the first month of the 51st Congress and appealed to his constituents.¹⁹ But disfranchisement laws—including rigid requirements for proving birthplace and heritage, which necessitated documentation many freedmen did not possess—further discouraged local blacks.²⁰ African Americans urged Cheatham and his Republican colleagues from North Carolina, Representatives John Bower and Hamilton Ewart, to withdraw from the House Republican Conference to protest the party's perceived indifference to their plight. Black Republican voters insisted Republican leaders should be reminded of their dependence on black voters in the South. A loyal adherent to his party, Cheatham refused their demand.²¹

The Democratic Party's loss to an African-American candidate two years before in the “Black Second” district convinced local leaders to embrace white supremacy campaigns by 1890. The cautious, neutral approach taken by Democrat Furnifold Simmons during his term in Congress was rapidly displaced by more extremist positions and the application of tremendous pressure on white Republican residents of the eastern black belt to vote against their African-American neighbors.²² But the Democrats, too, were divided by local economic depression. Wealthier party leaders, primarily lawyers and



★ HENRY PLUMMER CHEATHAM ★

editors, argued with farmers about how to resolve the business crisis.²³ The Democrats eventually nominated James M. Mewboorne, a business agent for the powerful North Carolina Farmers' Alliance, which had connections to the national Populist Party.²⁴ Seeking to attract whites to his camp, Cheatham vowed to aid depressed farmers. He maintained his ties to black voters by railing against steel magnate Andrew Carnegie for hiring foreign laborers instead of blacks in his northern mills.²⁵ Cheatham won re-election by roughly 1,000 votes, or 52 percent.²⁶ He was the only Republican in the North Carolina delegation and the only black Member of the 52nd Congress (1891–1893). Despite an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress, Cheatham won a plum assignment to the Committee on Agriculture.²⁷

Cheatham's and his wife Louise's poor health caused the Representative to be absent from most of the 52nd Congress. When present, Cheatham focused on advocating legislation publicly by emphasizing black citizens' contributions to American society since emancipation. On May 25, 1892, Cheatham asked the House to appropriate \$100,000 for an exhibit of African-American arts, crafts, tools, and industrial and agricultural products at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in October 1893. However, Cheatham's request was rejected after the debate degenerated into an argument on the Republican-backed Federal Elections Bill to reinforce the 15th Amendment. Democrats hijacked the debate, ominously warning that the "Force Bill" would only make life harder for southern blacks in the face of virulent white opposition.²⁸ Cheatham openly lamented the direction of the debate, solemnly noting, "I regret exceedingly that this question has assumed a hot political phase. . . . It seems to me that whenever the colored people of this country ask for anything, something unfortunate intervenes to hinder their getting what they asked."²⁹

Cheatham also sought to boost the failing economy in his district by introducing measures to protect individual farmers and arguing for federal regulation on the sales of options and futures to protect rural communities, a

stance supported even by his opponents.³⁰ The strong partisan flair he showed in his first term faded in the face of so much opposition—from within the GOP and from outside—to his legislative initiatives. "I am exceedingly anxious that the Democratic and Republican parties shall get together when you come to the Negro and that all will be willing to join in the effort to do something for him," he admitted in a floor speech.³¹ Cheatham broke with the Republican Party over the coinage of silver, joining the entire North Carolina delegation in voting for the unsuccessful measure.³²

By 1892, the Democratic state legislature had carved up the "Black Second" district, virtually destroying its traditional voting base. The old district's three southeastern counties—including Craven County, whose population was 65 percent black—were cut off.³³ State election laws also limited the ability of North Carolina blacks to vote. The uneasy alliance between North Carolina Populists and Republicans dissolved. The third party nominated its own candidate for Congress, Edward Alston Thorne, who had strong connections to the Farmers' Alliance.³⁴ Democrats were optimistic, declaring that the "cloud of blackness which has hovered over this section for so long" had lifted.³⁵ The Democrats selected Frederick A. Woodard, who had lost to former Representative James O'Hara in 1884. Cheatham easily gained the support of the district's Republican convention. The Populist Party, however, siphoned off some of the Republican base in the general election, luring African-American voters by offering a few black men patronage positions and nominations.³⁶ Cheatham lost his seat to Woodard by more than 2,000 votes (38 percent to Woodard's 45 percent). Thorne placed third, with 17 percent of the vote.³⁷

Cheatham did not relinquish his political career in Washington quietly. He won the Republican nomination for his old seat in 1894 but lost in the general election. Two years later, he lost the GOP nomination to his brother-in-law, George White, an outspoken political rival. Cheatham returned to Washington in 1897 when President William McKinley, a Republican and a former



★ HENRY PLUMMER CHEATHAM ★

colleague in the House, appointed him recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia. The U.S. Senate confirmed Cheatham for the post and he served four years. Cheatham remained active in African-American politics in the nation's capital, attending conferences with other prominent black men, including Frederick Douglass and Representative White, with whom he mended relations in the late 1890s. In 1907, Cheatham became the superintendent of the Oxford, North Carolina, orphanage he had founded two decades earlier. For the next 28 years, he expanded its facilities and surrounding farmland. At the time of his death in Oxford, on November 29, 1935, the orphanage housed 200 children.

FOR FURTHER READING

Anderson, Eric. *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872–1901* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

“Cheatham, Henry Plummer,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000340>.

Logan, Frenise A. *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876–1894* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964).

Reid, George W. “Four in Black: North Carolina’s Black Congressmen, 1874–1901,” *The Journal of Negro History* 64 (Summer 1979): 229–243.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

The New York Public Library (New York, NY)
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division,
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. *Papers:*
In the Henry Plummer Cheatham Papers, 1912–1941, two file folders. Persons represented include Henry Plummer Cheatham’s father, Representative Henry Plummer Cheatham.

NOTES

- 1 “Cheatham No Kicker,” 29 July 1889, *Washington Post*: 2.
- 2 Cheatham also received legal training under white Republican Robert E. Hancock, Jr., but he never practiced law. See Stephen Middleton ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 59.
- 3 Stanley B. Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990): 97–99.
- 4 Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872–1901* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981): 147–149.
- 5 Frenise A. Logan, *The Negro in North Carolina, 1876–1894* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964): 37; Maurine Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976): 156.
- 6 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 157.
- 7 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 159.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 154–155.
- 9 Leonard Schlup, “Cheatham, Henry Plummer,” *American National Biography* 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 765–766 (hereinafter referred to as *ANB*).
- 10 Michael J. Dubin et al., *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1998): 282.
- 11 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 161.
- 12 Black Members Thomas Miller of South Carolina and John Langston of Virginia were seated at the end of the first session.
- 13 “Why We Are ‘Suckers,’” 8 April 1889, *Chicago Daily Tribune*: 1; “The Solitary Colored Member,” 6 December 1888, *Washington Post*: 2.
- 14 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 170.
- 15 Steven W. Stathis, *Landmark Legislation, 1774–2002: Major U.S. Acts and Treaties* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2003): 134.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, House, 51st Cong., 1st sess. (23 August 1890): A625.
- 17 *Ibid.*, A624.
- 18 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 171–172.
- 19 “Cheatham’s Constituents,” 11 January 1890, *Washington Post*: 1.
- 20 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 167.
- 21 “Tanner’s Vacant Chair,” 4 October 1889, *New York Times*: 5.
- 22 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 165.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 24 For an indication of the political power behind the Farmers’ Alliance, see “North Carolina Republicans,” 31 July 1890, *Atlanta Constitution*: 1. Mewboorne’s name is occasionally spelled “Mewborne.”
- 25 Schlup, “Cheatham, Henry Plummer,” *ANB*; Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 178.
- 26 Dubin et al., *U.S. Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 291.
- 27 Mildred L. Amer, “Black Members of the United States Congress: 1870–2007,” 27 September 2007, Report RL30378, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. The Agriculture Committee assignment was one of the most attractive committee posts during this period. Political scientist Charles Stewart III ranks it as the eighth-most-desired assignment, using data collected from 1877 to 1947. See Stewart, “Committee Hierarchies in the Modernizing House, 1875–1947,” *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (1992): 845. It is unclear why Cheatham received such an important committee assignment, especially as the Democrats held the majority in the 52nd Congress; however, Stewart notes that in some late-19th-century Congresses, the Minority Leader was given jurisdiction over minority committee assignments (*Ibid.*, 842).
- 28 Christopher, *Black Americans in Congress*: 157.
- 29 *Congressional Record*, House, 52nd Cong., 1st sess. (25 May 1892): 4683.
- 30 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 188.
- 31 *Congressional Record*, House, 52nd Cong., 1st sess. (25 May 1892): 4683.
- 32 *Congressional Record*, House, 52nd Cong., 1st sess. (13 July 1892): 6133. The rest of the Republicans who voted for the bill were from silver-mining states.
- 33 See Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 141, 186. For maps of congressional districts over time, see Parsons et al., *United States Congressional Districts, 1883–1913*: 255–257.
- 34 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 194.
- 35 Quoted from the Tarboro (NC) *Southern* in Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 186.
- 36 Anderson, *Race and Politics*: 199.
- 37 Dubin et al., *United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997*: 299.