

# BLACK LEGISLATORS AFTER THE CIVIL WAR



## Black Legislators After the Civil War

### Introduction

The end of the Civil War in 1865 marked a momentous victory for African Americans. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1865) abolished slavery, while the Fourteenth Amendment (adopted in 1868) ensured equal protection of the laws to all Americans, regardless of race. In 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted voting rights to African American men, was ratified. These three amendments – known as the Reconstruction Amendments – offered a sense of hope to black Americans, who eagerly began to exercise their newly gained rights.

In Arkansas, the new state constitution declared racial discrimination illegal in 1868. Two years before the Fifteenth Amendment ensured the protection of African American men's right to vote at the federal level, black men were eligible to vote in Arkansas. Equally importantly, they were also eligible to engage in the democratic process by running for political offices. Historian Blake Wintory estimates that between 1868 and 1893, eighty-four black legislators served in Arkansas. Wintory writes, "Six made their careers in the Senate, seventy-four served exclusively in the House, and four were elected to both chambers." The presence of black politicians in state legislatures and other elected offices was critical to the political, economic, and social advancement of African Americans across the country.

With the collapse of the Reconstruction and the imposition of racist practices and laws that impeded voting rights and political participation for black Americans, African American politicians were pushed out of the Arkansas (and many other states') legislature. Between 1893 and 1973, not a single black person served in the Arkansas legislature. In this activity, you will examine the photos of six African American Arkansas legislators who served in the 1870s, 1880s, and early 1890s. This activity will help us understand the significance of black political participation after the Civil War and reflect on the question of why white Arkansans feared black politicians so much that they excluded them from the state legislature for 80 years.

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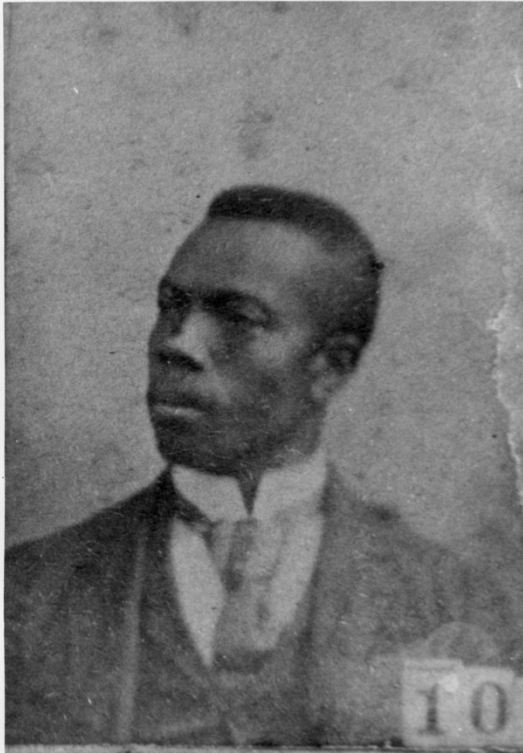


Photo 1: Sebron Williams Dawson, Representative for Jefferson County in the Arkansas General Assembly in 1889 and 1891, undated (African Americans photograph collection, ca. 1890-1954)

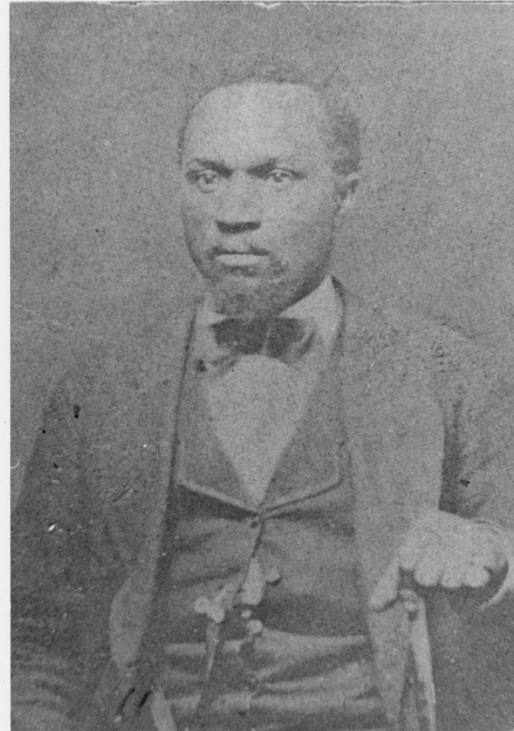


Photo 2: Anderson Ebberson, Representative for Jefferson County in the Arkansas General Assembly in 1877 and 1881, undated (African Americans photograph collection, ca. 1890-1954)

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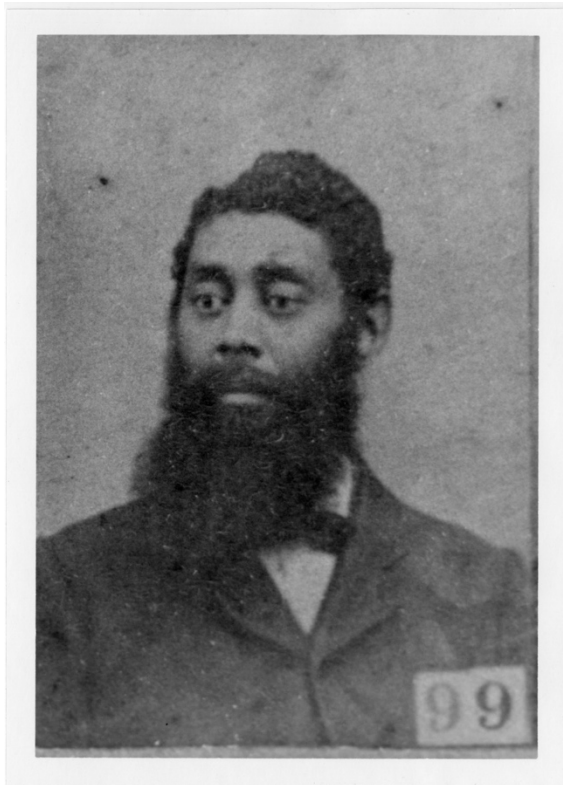


Photo 3: Henry A. Johnson,  
Representative for Chicot County in the  
Arkansas General Assembly in 1891,  
undated (African Americans photograph  
collection, ca. 1890-1954)

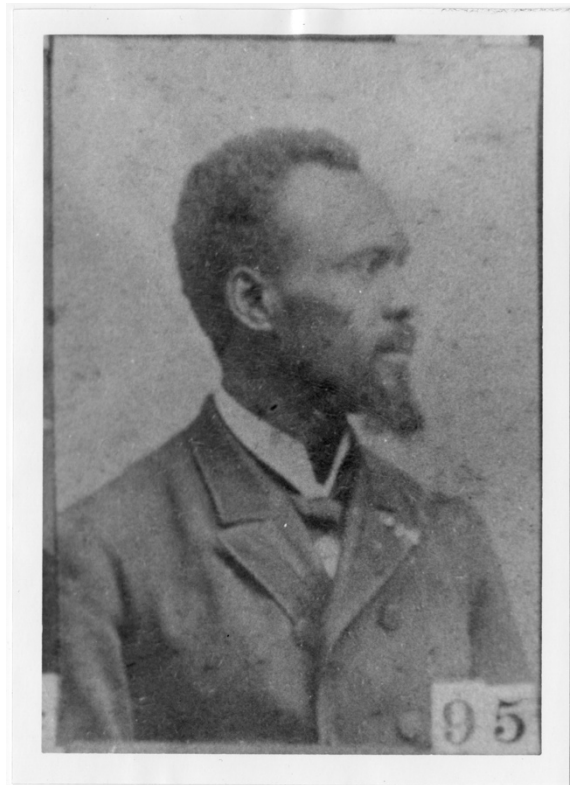


Photo 4: George W. Lowe,  
Representative for Monroe County in the  
Arkansas General Assembly in 1889,  
undated (African Americans photograph  
collection, ca. 1890-1954)

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Photo 5: John Gray Lucas, Representative for Jefferson County in the Arkansas General Assembly in 1891, undated (African Americans photograph collection, ca. 1890-1954)

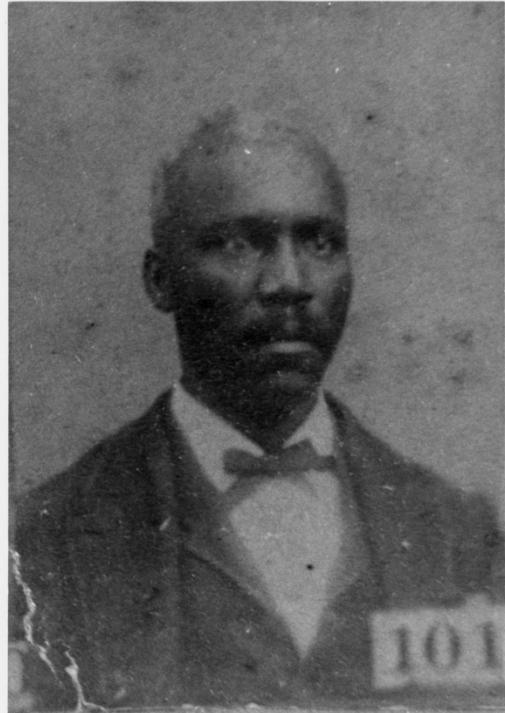


Photo 6: Henry Williams, Representative for Lincoln County in the Arkansas General Assembly in 1889 and 1891, undated (African Americans photograph collection, ca. 1890-1954)

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### Questions (work):

1. Who are the men in the six photos? See the photo captions for more information.
2. When did they serve? What counties did they represent? See the photo captions for more information.
3. Look up the six legislators from the photos. What did you learn about them? Were you able to find a lot of information about their lives? If no, why do you think there is so little information about them?
4. Only one of these six legislators, John Gray Lucas (Photo 5), has his own Encyclopedia of Arkansas entry. Read it here: <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/john-gray-lucas-1700/>. What does Lucas's biography tell us about the experience of black legislators in Arkansas after the Civil War?
5. If possible, research the population of the counties that these six legislators represented at the time when they served (1870s, 1880s, early 1890s). Who lived in those counties at the time? Who voted in those counties?
6. Research the history of black legislators in the United States and especially in the South after the Civil War. Why did Arkansas not have a single black state legislator for 80 years (from 1893 to 1973)?