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The American National Tree Award: Hiram Rhodes Revels

### **The Humble Giant**

Teenage barber, lifelong preacher and teacher, and influential legislator, Hiram Rhodes Revels was an American whose life was defined by public service and a faith in equality. In 1827, Revels was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina as a freedman to a black Baptist minister and Scottish mother. As a boy, Revels apprenticed as a barber and was educated even though it was illegal for black people to be educated in the state of North Carolina. He attended seminaries then later entered Knox College in Illinois. He was ordained at the age of 18 as a minister. Throughout his life, Revels was an educator— from serving as the principal of a black school to later becoming a college president. When the Civil War commenced in 1861, Revels recruited two African American regiments and became their chaplain on the battlefield.

During the Reconstruction, Revels entered politics, first as an alderman then later served in the Mississippi state senate. In 1870, the Mississippi state legislature needed to fill the vacant U.S. Senate seats of Confederates Jefferson Davis and Albert Brown. Revels was elected to serve out the one year remaining in Brown's term. When Revels arrived in Washington, among many blocking tactics, Democrats used the Dred Scott decision of 1857 that stated that no person of African descent was a citizen to argue that Revels had been a citizen for only two years since 1868 when the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment gave citizenship to African Americans. Since the Constitution required nine years of citizenship to become a senator, Revels was not qualified,

they argued. The Republicans disputed that Dred Scott did not apply to Revels because he was of mixed race. The Republican controlled Senate voted 48-8 to admit Revels, and he accepted his place as the first African American Senator with dignity.

After Revels was sworn in, *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* reported, "Mississippi Gorilla Admitted to the Senate." *The Chicago Republican* called Revels the "Senatorial Simian." Despite such outrageous and cruel editorials, three weeks later, Revels went beyond his duties as the Senator of Mississippi and fought for Black legislators in Georgia who had been ousted from their seats illegally. In his first speech on the Senate floor, Revels "appeal[ed] for protection from the strong arm of the government for her loyal children, irrespective of color and race." Soon after, the black Legislators were reinstated. Notably, Revels was compassionate; he believed that if the ex-confederates pledged loyalty to the union, they should receive amnesty and be restored of their citizenship. After his year in office, Revels returned to education to become the president of Alcorn University.

In his first speech as a senator, Revels quoted Shakespeare's *Measure to Measure*: "It is excellent to have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant." Revels recognized the Union's new strength and understood that such strength should be used wisely. Hiram Revels was an American who reached the full measure of his power and used it for the benefit of his new nation.