

George Henry White - standing up for civil rights

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BLADEN COUNTY, NC (WSFX) – Trailblazers and leaders who've made a difference in the world are recognized throughout the month of February in honor of Black History Month.

George Henry White was one of the first black men elected to congress in North Carolina in the late 1800s. He fought for civil rights, even before Dr. Martin Luther King, but it seems he's been forgotten in his hometown of Bladen County.

"But even though he left, you still honor a person's home I cannot understand why those people have not awakened to a native son's achievements," said New Bern historian Dorothy Brian.

After graduating from Howard University with a law degree, White went to New Bern where he founded a few schools and built a house for his family.

White was elected to the NC House of Representatives as a Republican in 1880, shortly after the reconstruction period where blacks were free, but still considered second class citizens. Jim Crow laws still plagued society, preventing people of color to share equal rights with whites. While in the House, White pushed to get funding for black schools.

In 1885, White was elected to the State Senate, but it wasn't until a year later that he made history. White was the only African American elected to serve in the United States Congress, representing the predominantly black 2nd District in eastern North Carolina. No other black politician would serve in Congress until 1928.

"He was a one man NAACP," said Bernard George, who impersonates White as a hobby. "When you consider the servile positions black people were in and you have a black man elected to congress - it's pretty major."

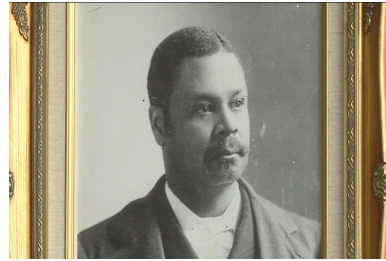
Brian said Republicans and populist fused together briefly after the reconstruction period, which led some political success for blacks.

White was re-elected in 1898, but success didn't come easy to him in Congress because he was very vocal about racial discrimination.

White introduced the first anti-lynching bill in 1901. He proposed that lynching become a federal crime, noting that of 109 people lynched, 87 were African American.

The bill never passed.

According to Brian, White introduced more bills to Congress – some focused on civil rights – but they never passed.



George Henry White



"He should've been a more positive influence on Congress," said Brian. "It seems he was just like a voice in the wilderness not being heard."

By 1901, White felt his blunt and upfront views on equality for African Americans would not get him re-elected. That's when he decided to give his final speech to Congress, January 29, 1901.

Some say it was a speech that defined his career in politics and inspired new politicians today.

White never returned to North Carolina, and moved north and urged other blacks to do the same. He founded a town called Whitesboro in New Jersey. In 1906 he settled in Philadelphia and joined the NAACP, practiced law and operated a commercial savings bank.

Twelve years later, George Henry White Died. He was 66-years-old.

"He went on and did other things with his life and wound up being a very good person," said Brian.

He was a black leader remembered, honored, and quoted for being a champion for civil rights.

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