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Shapiro: Benjamin Sterling Turner: Alabama's First Black Congressman

**Benjamin Sterling Turner:
Alabama's First Black Congressman
By Norman M. Shapiro**



Benjamin Sterling Turner

Eric Foner's masterful treatise, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution: 1863-1877*, was first published in 1988, and is generally thought to be the most comprehensive treatment of this most important subject. At the time, one reviewer of the book suggested "ironically, because this synthesis is so successful and thorough, it does raise the unsettling question and leave it unanswered – what is left to be done?" The answer follows from the large body of work produced over the last twenty years which indicates that the

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subject is still popular, and the historiography continues to expand.¹

One development during the Reconstruction period that has received increased attention recently is the election of black Congressmen from the previous slave states. Benjamin Sterling Turner, whose history motivated this paper, was Alabama's first black Congressman. A resident of Selma, Alabama, for most of his life, he was elected and served in the forty-second United States Congress between 1871 and 1873, serving as the representative for Alabama's First Congressional District. Although he represented Dallas County, Turner had a unique connection with Madison County, Alabama.

Benjamin Turner's picture appears on the cover and jacket, respectively, of two new books: Stephen Middleton's *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction* and Philip Dray's *Capitol Men. The American National Biography* presents a Turner profile contributed by William W. Rogers whose paper lists many of the earlier sources including a book by Richard Bailey which covers Alabama's black officeholders during Reconstruction. And two recent profiles on the internet cite William Rogers's contribution.²

¹Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution: 1863-1877*, (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1988); Michael Perman, *Review: Eric Foner's Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Mar., 1989), pp. 73-78; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom- The Civil War Era*, (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²Stephen Middleton, Editor, *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002); Philip Dray, *Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Congressmen*, (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008); William W. Rogers, *Turner, Benjamin Sterling*, *American National Biography*, Vol. 22. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.9-11; Richard Bailey, *Neither Carpetbaggers Nor Scalawag: Black Officeholders During the Reconstruction of Alabama, 1867-1878*, (Montgomery, AL: R. Bailey Pubs., 1991); Online 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica <<http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/4484/Turner-Benjamin-S-1825-1825-1894.html>>; Black Americans in Congress-Benjamin Sterling Turner, Representative from Alabama, <<http://baic.house.gov/member/profile.html?intlID=16>>

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Stephen Middleton's book provides a collective biographical and documentary portrait of the twenty-two African American politicians who served in the U. S. Congress from 1870 to 1901 and is the most recent book that provides more than just a few lines on Benjamin Turner. He writes in his Acknowledgements, "this project might not have ever moved forward had Professor Eric Foner, who probably knows more about the black Congressmen who are covered in this volume than any other scholar, not responded positively when I queried him about the potential value of such a project." Foner had provided some information on the black Congressmen in his 1988 book and in 1995 had published *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction* which is a compilation of concise biographical data on some 1,400 black public officials of the reconstruction era from Congressmen to justices of the peace to constables.³

Dray's *Capitol Men* provides narrative portraits of two black senators and five of the fourteen black congressmen who served between 1870 and 1877. Facing massive prejudice and occasional violence, these men served their constituents with skill and passionate advocacy, promoting civil rights, education, and economic opportunity. The jacket of the book features the 1872 Currier & Ives lithograph showing the first seven black members who served in either or both the 41st and 42nd Congresses. About the portrait Dray writes, "the picture was considered an object of scorn among many Southern whites, however, who refused to countenance the sudden transformation of slaves into holders of public office," and that "faded prints of the engraving still hung in modest sharecropper's cabins when researchers from the Works Progress Administration visited the Southern Black belt in the 1930s." Benjamin S. Turner is second from the left in the portrait but his place in the group of sixteen is

³Middleton, p. xv; Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders During Reconstruction*, (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1996).

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noted only on the first page of the Preface where the picture is
described.⁴



Foner wrote an interesting review of Dray’s book in the November 3, 2008, edition of *The Nation Magazine*. Taking note of the impending presidential election, Foner began his article: “a few months ago, an article in the *New York Magazine* portrayed Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy as marking the ‘end’ of traditional black politics and the emergence of a new generation of black leaders whose careers began after the civil rights struggle and who strive to represent not simply black voters but the wider electorate.” He pointed out that this was similar to the situation that existed before the Civil War where differences led to debates among black abolitionists. “Then, as now,” he writes, “black politics was as complex and multifaceted as any other kind of politics, and one of the valuable implications of the new book *Capitol Men* (although its author, Philip Dray, does not quite put it that way) is that Obama’s candidacy represents not so much a repudiation of the black political tradition as an affirmation of one of its long-established vigorous strands.” Foner continues with descriptions of the contributions made by

⁴Dray, pp. ix,x.

Shapiro: Benjamin Sterling Turner: Alabama's First Black Congressman the Congressmen, the problems they had to overcome. He noted that "For many decades historians viewed reconstruction as the lowest point in the American experience, a time of corruption and misgovernment presided over by unscrupulous carpetbaggers from the North, ignorant former slaves and traitorous scalawags. Popular histories like Dray's, aimed at an audience outside the academy, have tended to infuse their subjects with drama by focusing on violent confrontations rather than the operation and accomplishments (public school systems, pioneering civil rights legislation, efforts to rebuild the shattered Southern economy) of the biracial governments of the South after the Civil War." Foner then mentions Benjamin Turner although he was not one of the sixteen considered by Dray, "Benjamin Turner's owner allowed him to learn to read and write and to run a hotel and livery table in Selma."⁵

Thirty years earlier Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, author of a short but thoughtful history of Alabama prepared for the Bicentennial of the American Revolution, highlighted how older historians portrayed blacks and Benjamin Turner, in particular, during Reconstruction:⁶

Describing Reconstruction, they saw freedmen as stereotypes like "darkies" and "big bucks," and showered them with adjectives such as "jet black," "sable," "copper colored," "burly," and "ignorant." Unaccustomed to the idea of black political leaders, they overlooked these men altogether or viewed them in the distorted mirror of a Carnival show.

John Witherspoon DuBose, a former planter, slaveowner and Klansman, mentioned Alabama's first black congressman, Benjamin Sterling Turner, by his slave name of "Ben Gee" and paid him this

⁵Eric Foner, *Rooted in Reconstruction: The First Wave of Black Congressmen*, (New York: The Nation, October 15, 2008); Matt Bai, *Is Obama the End of Black Politics?*, (New York Times, August 6, 2008).

⁶Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, *Alabama: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 71-72.

Huntsville Historical Review, Vol. 35 [2010], No. 1, Art. 4 patronizing complement; “a remarkably efficient and patronizing servant.” DuBose’s view of Reconstruction, capsuled in his title, *Alabama’s Tragic Decade*, first appeared in 1912 as a newspaper serial and was reissued in 1940 as a book wherein blacks were cartooned as comic figures with vapid expressions and outsized lips.⁷

This brings us to the remarkable story of Benjamin Sterling Turner. Turner was born March 17, 1825, to an unknown slave owned by Colonel Neville Gee near the town of Weldon in Halifax County, North Carolina. Colonel Gee, who married (ca 1797) Elizabeth Harwell, daughter of Sterling Harwell, was a naval officer in the War of 1812, a member of the House of Commons from Halifax in 1818 and a very prominent citizen of his day. His brother, Joseph Gee, had gone to Wilcox County, Alabama, in 1816 or earlier where he was engaged in cotton planting at a place which later became known as Gee’s Bend. Neville Gee also owned one or more plantations in Alabama which were also under the supervision of Joseph. In November, 1824, Joseph Gee, a bachelor, died suddenly leaving a large estate (including forty-seven Negroes) *intestate*. Neville’s son, Sterling Gee, went to Alabama to take care of his father’s plantations and to administer his deceased uncle’s estate. Sterling’s brother, Charles, was also in Alabama where at one time he was teaching school. This Alabama connection was revealed in a collection of letters between Colonel Gee and his sons in Alabama.⁸

After Neville Gee died on October 2, 1827, his widow, Elizabeth Harwell Gee, married Thomas Turner of Madison

⁷ John Witherspoon DuBose, *Alabama’s Tragic Decade: Ten Years of Alabama, 1865-1874*, ed. James K. Greer, (Birmingham: Webb Book Co., 1940), p. 311.

⁸W. J. Fletcher, *The Gee Family*, (Rutland, Vermont: The Tuttle Publishing Co., 1937). p. 83; Gee Family Papers, 1816-1850, Halifax County, North Carolina; and Wilcox County, Alabama. Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations—Series F Selections from the Manuscript Department of Duke University Library.

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County, Alabama, on October 27, 1829. Thomas Turner and his brothers Simon and Sugars were early residents of Madison County. Thomas Turner's first wife, Martha Binford Turner, had died in 1825. Then only six months after the Turner-Gee marriage, Thomas Turner died on May 2, 1830, leaving a large estate of 2,600 acres and 50 slaves. One of these slaves was five year old Benjamin whom Elizabeth had brought to her second marriage and retained in her widowhood. Later that year Elizabeth moved to Selma in Dallas County, Alabama, with Benjamin perhaps to be closer to her sons Sterling and Charles Gee, who were only about thirty miles from Selma in Wilcox County. Benjamin grew up in Alabama without formal schooling though he surreptitiously obtained a fair education.⁹

One of the five legatees to Thomas Turner's estate was Major William H. Gee in right of his wife, Susan B. Gee. William H. Gee had married Thomas's daughter, Susan Binford Gee in Southampton County, Virginia, on January 30, 1819, and subsequently moved to Madison County, Alabama, and then to Selma after 1840. The 1840 census shows him living in Madison County but also owning a plantation and 49 slaves in Autauga County, Alabama, which adjoins Dallas County. William was from a Virginia branch of the same Gee family and a third cousin of his contemporaries, Sterling and Charles Gee.

In 1845 when Benjamin was twenty, Elizabeth Turner sold him to Major Gee to pay off debts, and Gee subsequently placed him in charge of the Gee House, a hotel which he had acquired in Selma. When Major Gee died in 1853, Benjamin became the property of his son, Dr. James Turner Gee, a physician, planter and also a hotel owner. Well aware of Benjamin's industriousness and business acumen, Dr. Gee permitted him to hire out his own time, operate a livery stable and to manage his hotel. (The antebellum hotel has been restored and is now known as the St. James Hotel). Benjamin's management of the hotel became particularly important when Dr. Gee served in the

⁹ N. M. Shapiro, "*Ditto's Landing*," *A History of Early Settlement, Madison County before Statehood*, (Huntsville, AL: Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society, 2008), p. 79.

Confederate Army from 1861 to 1865. As a Lieutenant Colonel, Dr. Gee was in command of the First Alabama Artillery Battalion at the Battle of Mobile Bay in August 1864. The battalion handled the guns until they were all knocked out of position, losing 150 killed and wounded of about 500 engaged.¹⁰

Benjamin Turner was an affluent man by 1860 and was respected by both blacks and whites in the community. It will be convenient here to rely on the article by William Rogers who provides an acceptable account of the defining chapter of Turner's life:¹¹

When the Civil War began, Turner bought \$200 worth of Confederate bonds Throughout the conflict Selma was an important manufacturing and ordnance center for the Confederacy and Turner continued his own business affairs. . . . In the spring of 1865 Union general James H. Wilson's cavalry forces swept through the state, capturing Selma and burning two-thirds of the city. Turner's properties were lost in the general destruction. He later sought reimbursement of \$8,000 from the Southern Claims Commission. It is not clear how much if any compensation he received, but Turner went to work and soon prospered as a general merchant.

Concerned about the welfare of his race, Turner put up his own money to establish a school for black children in Selma. His efforts urging former slaves to make work contracts helped establish a peaceful return to order and earned him the respect of the white community.

After the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, Turner was appointed county tax collector with biracial approval.

¹⁰James T. Gee Papers, 1837-1864, Family & Civil War Correspondence of James T. Gee & Letters of Gee's Father, Guide to the Cataloged Collections of the Manuscript Dept. of the William R. Perkins Library, Duke University. William Rogers and the two Internet articles which cite his paper (Footnote 2) incorrectly identify James T Gee as a brother, instead of a son, of William H. Gee.

¹¹ Rogers, pp. 9-10.

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He resigned after a year and, running as an Independent, was elected city councilman. He and another former bondsman were the city's first black city councilmen. When the town began paying them, Turner resigned, because he believed that in such destitute times a city official should serve without compensation. When Conservative Democrats failed to promise voting rights for blacks, Turner helped deliver the town and county in 1868 to the victorious Ulysses S. Grant.

Turner recouped economically to the point that in 1870 he had personal property worth \$10,000. He was nominated for Congress in that year with the aid of newly enfranchised blacks and native white Republicans (scalawags). His moderate political philosophy cost him the financial support of the First District's northern born Republicans (carpetbaggers). Undeterred, the candidate sold a horse to raise campaign funds, and, running on a platform of "Universal Suffrage and Universal Amnesty," he was easily elected. The district had a majority of blacks; in Dallas County alone, blacks outnumbered whites 32,152 to 8,522, and he was the first black elected from Alabama to the national House of Representatives.

In the House, Turner was appointed to the Committee on Invalid Pensions and impressed congressional colleagues with his political ability and judgment. Besides his general work with the committee, Turner introduced three bills providing pensions for individual Union army veterans, one of them a black. On two occasions his remarks before the House demonstrated a good command of parliamentary rules. During his term Turner established himself by deed and word as the antithesis of a Radical Republican. He introduced five bills to remove the Fourteenth Amendment's political disabilities from eight white Alabamians. Seeking aid for Selma, which was still rebuilding its demolished structures, Turner failed to

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obtain federal money for repairs to a war damaged
Episcopal Church.

Turner's tenure was marked by three main attempts, all unsuccessful, to affect the economy of Alabama and the South. Denied floor time for supporting speeches, he had his remarks placed in the appendix of the Congressional Globe. The neophyte congressman strongly opposed the cotton tax imposed by Congress. In effect from 1866 to 1888, the tax was justified as a means of having the South pay a part of the war costs. For years, southern states unsuccessfully petitioned Congress to refund the money. Turner presented a memorial from the Mobile Board of Trade asking for reimbursement and introduced his own bill to return the cotton tax to the southern states. He argued that the law was unconstitutional, favored foreign competitors over Americans, and hurt small black and white farmers as well as landowners, merchants, and manufacturers.

Turner also failed to obtain passage of a measure appropriating \$200,000 in federal money to construct in Selma a public building to be used primarily as a custom house, post office, and revenue office. The Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds gave no serious attention to the bill.

Turner's most significant measure authorized U.S. land commissioners to purchase private lands sold at public auction, subdivide the acreage, and sell it to landless citizens living in the immediate vicinity. The property would be sold in tracts of 160 acres or as much less as the purchaser desired, and the buyer would pay 10 percent down and 10 percent annually. Turner intended "the landless and poor people of our country" to benefit, especially blacks. Calling the bill an act of justice made compelling by dire need, he asked priority of passage over various laws providing federal relief to foreigners. The measure never got past the Committee on Public Lands.

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Turner returned to Selma and was re-nominated by the Republicans in the First District. His conservative course in Congress and nonpartisan patronage appointments provoked a challenge from Philip Joseph, black editor of the *Mobile Watchman*, who ran as an Independent. Joseph's action split the black vote and that of white Republicans and resulted in the election of Frederick G. Bromberg, a native white who ran for both the Democrats and the newly formed Liberal Republicans. After his defeat, Turner retired from seeking elective office.

The crippling economic depression of the 1870s forced Turner into bankruptcy, and he turned in desperation to farming. Actually, his land, 300 acres in Dallas County, was more than that owned by most whites and blacks. While not a candidate himself, Turner sustained his interest in politics. Through 1880 he served three times on the state Republican Executive Committee, he was a delegate at large to the Republican National Convention in 1880, and he was a Republican presidential elector in 1880. After that he withdrew from political affairs to concentrate on farming. Hard economic times continued, and he died in poverty on his farm near Selma.

Roger's statement about Turner seeking reimbursement for his loss from the Southern Claims Commission requires clarification. Turner did seek reimbursement of \$7,804.40 and was awarded \$4,958.21. Previous authors were perhaps not aware or did not have access to the report of the claim which was dated April 21, 1871, when Turner was serving in the Congress. The report provides useful information about Turner and his circumstances. Instead of the usual large number of questions that claimants were required to answer, Turner provided a previously unpublished narrative which follows:¹²

¹²Southern Claims Commission Approved Claims, 1871-1880, Microcopy M2062, Roll No. 6.

Washington,

D.C. Apl. 21, 1871
B.S. Turner (col'd) sworn,
To Counsel,

LOYALTY: At the time of the taking of my property by the Union forces I was residing in the city of Selma, Alabama. I was a freedman according to the laws of the United States, though I had not exercised my rights until the federal army came there. I had been hiring my time. In the month of January 1865 I paid the last payment of \$250 for my time. Being a slave I was necessarily compelled to serve the Confederates in the trenches or otherwise. But I never did anything for them voluntarily. I never was a slave voluntarily but was such in obedience to the laws of the nation. When the war broke out of course my sympathies were for freedom and when Gen. McClellan captured some negroes along his lines and sent them back to their masters, I did not know how to decide. But when Mr. Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, then I was for the federals; until then I was wavering. I was waiting to see which side would give me my freedom. In 1862, I heard a gentleman blowing considerably about the success of the Confederate armies and I made a remark to the effect that I did not think they could succeed without a navy. I saw after that they were going to do something with me and I went out and took some Confederate bonds. I do not know whether that was an act of disloyalty or not. I had either to do that or to run away or die. So I took these bonds and they gave me a puff in the newspapers for doing it. I took \$200 worth. I concluded that was the lesser evil of the three. I did buy these bonds as a matter of necessity, and I sold them in about ten days, and got my money back. I never served

the Confederates in any way except that I sometimes had to take care of some mules, or under labor for them as a slave. I gave my boss \$250 for the right of attending to my business while attending to his at the same time. I kept a livery stable in Selma and run omnibuses, hacks, etc. That was my business and my boss left me some business of his to look after, such as collecting money for him and attending to his affairs as a matter of encouragement to me and to make me behave myself and not run away while the war was going on. I was at Fort Morgan awhile with Dr. Gee as his body-servant and cook but I did not like the place and he allowed me to return home soon afterwards. With the exception of buying the Confederate bonds of which I have spoken, I never contributed any of my horses, mules, carriages, or money to assist the Confederate cause. Wilson's force was the first federal force I ever saw in Selma. I was pleased enough at the taking of the town and rejoiced until they took everything I had and then I got mad. I joined Wilson's army and kept with him until he disbanded his army. I got up a regiment of colored men in a few days after Wilson took the place and was Captain of Co. A, 4th Alabama Volunteers. I was the first tax collector in Selma, nominated and elected under the reconstruction acts. I was required to give a bond of \$40,000 and the assessments amounted to \$160,000. Of course, I could not have given the bond except by the confidence the people had in me as a man of business and enterprise. Since that time I have been elected councilman of our city and served in that capacity until I was elected to Congress here. I had been hiring my time off and on for three or four years before the surrender. In 1856 I offered to pay \$1000 cash in gold for my freedom, but as I found the laws of Alabama would not permit me to buy my freedom except through a third person who would stand in the relation of master to me, I preferred to remain with my old master and keep my money.

SEIZURE: My property was taken by a Dutch officer belonging to Wilson's command: I understood him to say "take the mules and horses to the 8th Iowa." I could not swear to that. I was excited at the time, considerably alarmed and sort of mad too. A squad of mounted men under command of an officer came to my stable and commenced taking out everything. I had a very large, strong mule named Tom to which I was most attached. He had become nearly blind. I asked them to leave me Tom and after receiving some bad words from them the officer pointed his pistol at me and took him and the rest away. I saw Tom afterwards in the dining room of the Mobile House in Selma: they had him there for show.

HORSES & MULES: They took 9 mules and 8 horses from me. The horses were worth on the average \$150, apiece; I paid \$225 for one of them. The mules were worth \$175 apiece. They were strong hardy mules and I could sell them now for \$250 apiece in Selma. The horses and mules were all taken by this same party at the same time.

CORN: They also took 760 sacks of shell-corn containing 2 bushels to a sack. Corn was worth a dollar and a half in greenbacks at that time: it was worth a dollar & 5 or 10 cents in gold. It cost me \$50 a bushel in Confederate money.

PEAS: They also took 50 sacks of peas of the same size as the corn sacks and worth about the same as the corn.

FODDER: There were 118 bales of fodder taken averaging 415 pounds to the bale – some nearly 500 pounds - which was worth 150 a hundred in greenbacks.

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HAY: I had 67 bales of hay taken also. I made a memorandum of the things that were taken the next day and my petition in this case was made up from that.

OATS: They took 30 sacks of oats, worth \$4 bushel. That is a fair price. We were getting that for them there.

WAGONS & HARNESS: They took them. They were worth more than \$200, each. They had been used about 6 months. They were made for army wagons for the Confederate army and I bought them from parties who had more than they wanted on hand. I bought them for the purpose of hauling wood. Afterwards I saw them used in the U. S. Army in the place of broken ones.

CARRIAGES & HARNESS: They were ordinary street hacks, in good order, made to carry 6 persons. They were of the style of private carriages of the day. I would give \$600 for the same kind of carriages and harness today. These things were all taken by the same parties. I saw one of these carriages broken down on the road between Montgomery and Selma after most of the army had gone over the road. I saw an officer riding in one of them and a man driving him and the other one I never saw again. The horses and mules were first taken. There was an officer in command of the men who ranked as Captain or Lieutenant, I judge. The officers marched in there and turned the soldiers loose on my property. I never heard any orders given to the men to take my property. I went to an officer and complained about it and all he said was that I would have a chance now to make it back again. Officers were in command of the squads of soldiers that took my property. There was probably three acres around my stable. It was a garden and on one side was my stable. They just rode in there and knocked down that fence and put there horses right in there and there they stood and fed out of it as long as there was any there. They knocked the plank off the

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stable so that they could go in and out. They put their horses in the lot and in the stable also. The officers were there and I suppose they must have controlled them. I understood these horses and mules were to be taken for the use of the army. I saw one of the mules dead at a creek about five miles from Montgomery. I also saw three of these mules at Atlanta, Geo., in an army wagon. The balance of them I never saw. I had a mare with a young colt that they took and I afterwards saw her dead on the banks of Mush Creek about 20 miles from Selma right along where the army was traveling. The mule that was dead was also on the line of march of the army, as was also the carriage. I marched in the rear of the army: everything was ahead of me except the rear guard.

The narrative is both illuminating and insightful in its description of how Turner coped with the conditions of his unusual servitude: His purchase of \$200 in Confederate bonds, for example, was not just a symbol of his affluence, as implied by most of the authors, but simply a ruse to forestall retaliation for appearing to be a dissident, and he even got his money back.

His service in the Union army was previously unknown. Foner indicates that only four black Congressmen served in the Union armed services: Charles E. Nash of Louisiana, Robert Small of South Carolina, Josiah T. Walls of Florida, and John R. Lynch of Mississippi. Josiah Walls was one of the first seven black members and is also shown in the 1877 Currier & Ives lithograph discussed earlier. The 4th Alabama Volunteer Infantry Regiment (African Descent) was renamed the 106th U.S. Regiment Colored Troops on May 16, 1864. The roster is unavailable.¹³

The extensive testimony of only one witness, a slave named John Ford, appears in the claim. Ford had made his way to Selma

¹³Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 10, Note 18; Only about 100 blacks received commissions in the USCT (United States Colored Troops). At this stage of the war, local commanders occasionally and haphazardly made appointments that were never officially recognized

Shapiro: Benjamin Sterling Turner: Alabama's First Black Congressman after his master, a young man from Texas, had been captured near Nashville. He was employed by Turner to drive a wagon, mostly hauling wood, and one omnibus up until Turner “got ready & fixed up and went off with them (Wilson’s army).” He also said, “He got a suit of clothes to put on – blue army clothes – and he had a sword & one of these carbines or guns.” Ford verified that just about all of Turner’s property (rolling stock, animals and fodder) were used or taken and that was the basis of the settlement

Turner’s written testimony for the Southern Claims Commission is obviously in his own words and is quite different from the elegant and grandiose language of his supporting remarks for the two bills for which he was denied floor time. The remarks are published in the Appendix to the Congressional Globe for the second session, 42nd Congress. The complete remarks for both bills: the first – On the bill providing for the erection of public buildings in the city of Selma, Alabama, dated May 30, 1872, page 530, and the second – On a petition and memorial praying Congress and the country to refund the cotton tax, dated May 31, 1872, page 540, are printed in Middleton’s book but are also available on the internet. The first paragraph of the former bill illustrates the character of the approximately 2700 words in the bills:¹⁴

Mr. TURNER. Mr. Speaker, in April last I had the honor to introduce a bill in this House providing for the erection of public buildings in the city of Selma, Alabama, suitable for the pressing demands of business and commerce in that growing city. That bill has been referred to the Committee on Public Grounds, and without knowing what their report might be, I desire to offer some reasons to this house why the bill should pass at once. And before proceeding further, let me say to the members of the House that I am earnest and pressing for the passage of this bill, and I shall not

¹⁴<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwzglink.html#anchor4>

relinquish one foot of ground until I shall have succeeded in my efforts. The people of Selma have been magnanimous toward me; they have buried in the tomb of oblivion many of those animosities upon which we hear so many eloquent appeals in this Chamber; and I intend to stand by and labor for them in their need and desolation. In doing this I repay personal kindness, resent wrong by upholding right, and at the same time advocate a measure of necessity to the Government of my country.

In 1985 two black fraternal organizations began a campaign to erect a monument on the grave of Congressman Benjamin S. Turner. A bi-racial committee was formed and the *Selma – Times Journal* reminded Selma’s citizens of Turner’s roll in winning amnesty for their grandfathers, and the money for an impressive marker was quickly raised. United States Senator (and Admiral) Jeremiah Denton, Alabama’s first Republican Senator since Reconstruction attended the ceremony and paid tribute to Turner’s patriotism.¹⁵

¹⁵ Alton Fitts III., *Selma – Queen City of the Black Belt*, (Selma, Alabama, Clairmont Press, 1989), p. 166.