

NEW MAN IN THE HOUSE: THOMAS A. SYKES

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On Wednesday, July 1, 1868, Pasquotank County, North Carolina began something new in its political history. According to information available to the present writer, that date marks the first time a Negro sat in the North Carolina House of Representatives on behalf of Pasquotank County. The new man: the Honorable Thomas A. Sykes.¹

A Negro in a Southern state legislature, in 1868, was an interesting phenomenon in itself throughout the Region - one may also say, in our Nation. Mr. Sykes would make his own mark in the path of Pasquotank's rich heritage and among its distinguished sons.

Given the paucity of information available to the writer thus far, Mr. Sykes could be called an 'elusive solon'. Originally, this sketch of him was much shorter and but a little appendix to a larger work, but it became a separate article in the early 1970's. The purpose then as now was to introduce this legislator rather than presenting a large-scale story - one which Sykes may well merit. In reviewing and revising the manuscript in 1978, some items have been added and in the process, Representative Sykes seems more and more to deserve the 'full treatment'. Perhaps someone will give him such honor.

Some readers, having finished this article, may consider its subject to have historic overtones neither startling in the overall panorama of political history nor necessarily of lasting impact. Yet, presenting this summary of Sykes's legislative participation during the Summer of 1868 may have merit on

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Among Sykes's many House colleagues at the time was Tyrrell County Representative Thomas J. Jarvis, who was to become governor of North Carolina.

three other counts: (1) suggesting efforts more than a century ago by a neophyte legislator who as a Negro was not only brand new to, but particularly vulnerable in the comparatively rarefied atmosphere of North Carolina's (or any state's) General Assembly; (2) implying that he necessarily was significant amid his County's political structure; and (3) compiling in abbreviated form what appears to be a hitherto unwritten narrative, in addition to providing one highlight for the first North Carolina legislative session after the State's 1868 Constitutional Convention.²

News items in the North Carolinian, a Republican newspaper founded in Elizabeth City (seat of Pasquotank County) in 1869, point to Thomas Sykes having been a luminary in both Pasquotank's and the North Carolina First Congressional District's political maneuverings. One ~~may~~ also ~~learn~~ that Mr. Sykes was a Republican.

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The mechanics of re-establishing a General Assembly for Sykes, colleagues and successors to serve in, had historic drama. Even the name was new, although some members of the Constitutional Convention wanted to keep the old name, "House of Commons." A brief summary of the important provisions follows, abstracted from events of March 14 and 16, 1868, in Raleigh: a Representative had to be in the county one year before his election and be a qualified elector; the signed Constitution (signators including Charles C. Pool of Pasquotank) had to be approved by Congress and ratified by the voters; April 21, 22, 23, 1868, were the dates for ratification, which action was to be in accordance with Congressional legislation "known as the Reconstruction Laws" and 120 representatives plus seven members of Congress were to be elected; and finally, Raleigh's capitol bell was to ring while the Constitution was signed. On motion, these provisos were carried by the Convention, which included prominence of presence by President Calvin J. Cowles, Secretary T. A. Byrnes, at opposite philosophic poles the Delegates Plato Durham and James W. Hood (the latter a prominent Negro), and a statement on white and Negro office-holding. (The foregoing abstract is from the one-volume Constitution of the State of North-Carolina, Together with the Ordinances and Resolutions of the Constitutional Convention, ... Jan. 14th, 1868, p. 11 (residence) and Convention Journal, pp. 474-475, 480, 484-485 (office-holding).)

Sykes necessarily had prominence in the estimate of the local electorate. He served no less than ~~four~~^{five} terms in the North Carolina House, representing Pasquotank. He was nominated for the North Carolina Senate. High electoral esteem for him was an actuality.

One would prefer having more information to present here about Mr. Sykes, the man. He was born a slave, according to one source, and rose to serve with the Republican State Executive Committee in 1868.³ Unfortunately, other than references to him in the present writer's text concerning another Negro legislator, little else was unearthed concerning Sykes's activities in Pasquotank County or elsewhere.

He may have had a sort of mechanical or carpentry shop. This idea is postulated since Pasquotank's Board of County Commissioners, on October 22, 1868, accepted the resignation of a certain Alfred Lane as "Overseer of Road from T. Sykes' Work-shop to Mrs. Cloak Miller [sic] old residence."⁴ If "T. Sykes" of the "Work-shop" was our Legislator, the quotation lends credence to the nature of his occupation at the time. Of his family, antecedents, date and place of birth or other related matters, the few records seen were silent.⁵

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Elizabeth Balanoff, "Negro Legislators in the North Carolina General Assembly, July 1868 - February, 1872," North Carolina Historical Review, XLIX-1 (Winter, 1972), p. 29.

See also...

Pasquotank Commissioners' MS unpagged Minute Book 1. Commissioners appointed a certain ~~Henry~~^{Henry} Thompson as Lane's successor (*ibid.*). (Office of the Register of Deeds, Pasquotank County Courthouse, Elizabeth City.)

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one other

Excepting sources cited, ~~the~~^{the} reference to Sykes also seen is Hamilton, who treats the legislator microscopically by lumping him as one of nineteen "negroes and two carpetbaggers" to be found in the 1870-1871 "Reform" Legislature. However, that Session, remarkable to note among Hamilton's descriptions of Black legislators, included the "ablest representative of his race," John H. Williamson. (J. G. de Rouhac Hamilton, Reconstruction in North Carolina, pp. 536 note (Sykes), 537 (Williamson).)

On Tuesday, July 7, 1868, Representative Thomas A. Sykes, having been previously sworn and seated, Noon, July 1, received his first committee appointment - to the seven-man Joint Committee on "removal of disabilities from citizens of North Carolina." These were political "disabilities" occasioned by conditions imposed by Congress⁶ - i.e., via the Fourteenth Amendment (of which a sentence or two more, later in this article). The Committee had four members from the House, including Sykes. Two days later, Thursday, July 9, Sykes became a member of the eleven-man Committee on Privileges and Elections. Almost a week later (Wednesday, July 15), he won a third committee appointment, as one of five House members on the Joint Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds. All these and other items we learn from the House Journal for that Session.

Representative Sykes introduced his first bill on Saturday, July 18, 1868. This proposed legislation provided for election of members to the Forty-first Congress, scheduled to convene November 3, 1868. His Bill was "laid over" and then, on July 21, sent to the Privileges and Elections Committee, of which he was a member.

A week later, Sykes introduced a resolution to pay a certain J. J. Sawyer "who served as Engrossing Clerk before that officer had been elected." Sykes's

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Balanoff, *op. cit.*, p. 32, has this to say of 'disabilities' and Negro legislators of that period: "Negro legislators in 1868 demonstrated conciliatory attitudes toward former Confederates. Many favored the removal of political disabilities to allow the disfranchised former Confederates to retain the offices to which they had been illegally elected. When in July, 1868, a resolution requesting Congress to remove immediately all disabilities of those elected was first presented in the House of Representatives, eight Negroes were among the majority voting to table it. By the end of the month, eleven Negroes favored such a resolution, and only three opposed it. They still opposed the immediate seating of those legislators whose status was in question." Mr. Sykes generally voted with the majority.

resolution was "laid over." (On August 3, another Representative introduced a resolution for the same person. It was adopted.)

Tuesday, July 21, Sykes introduced a resolution "instructing the Committee on Propositions and Grievances to enquire into and report upon the expediency of doing away with the present system of working on public bridges and highways. Adopted." This Committee later suggesting postponing the matter until the next session, to begin later in 1868.

On Saturday, August 15, Mr. Sykes introduced a bill to incorporate the Dismal Swamp Steam Transportation Company. The Bill went to the Committee on Internal Improvements and seems to have died there. Next, on Friday, August 21, Sykes introduced a bill favoring a certain Mrs. Sarah Mann of Pasquotank County. This legislation had better luck. It passed second and third House reading^s under suspension of rules; subsequently passed the Senate (a 25-2 vote on the third reading there); and was ratified.

Perhaps having much interest for Representative Sykes as a Privileges and Elections Committee member, among other matters considered, was the proposition concerning a contested election to the House for Wilson Carey, a Negro. Mr. Carey won his arguments, with the Committee apparently accepting his credentials and the sentiments of such supporters as he may have had. Thus, Mr. Carey eventually was sworn in as a bona fide House member. He returned to the chamber in several subsequent sessions.

Among many other legislative matters which Sykes obviously view^{ed} considered, voted upon or heard about as a House member, three not mentioned thus far may be selected for the present purposes, in random chronology. In one instance, the North Carolina Senate pondered gallery divisions for accomodating

white and Negro spectators. The decision was that white "ladies and gentlemen" would fill in on the President's right; "col[or] ladies and gentlemen" on his left; and the "middle to any that choose to occupy it."⁷ It is not impossible that Representative Sykes, hearing of the division, felt his senatorial colleagues did as well as might be expected, given the times.

In another discussion area, Sykes as a legislator had a vote for United States Senator. One of the rare instances when such a North Carolina luminary came from Pasquotank County also provided an opportunity for Mr. Sykes to aid that candidate. The House vote for Senator John Pool (who won for the 1868-1873 term in Congress) was 78-25, Mr. Sykes with the majority.⁸ (The citizens back home doubtless were proud. Could Sykes not have aided Pool, and kept his political health?)

In the third instance to be cited here, Representative Sykes like all members of that 1868 General Assembly, was in the right place at the right time to participate even if in a small way by helping to create one of the Nation's more significant moments. During the House proceedings beginning Twelve Noon, July 2, 1868, the North Carolina lower chamber as one of its earliest actions approved the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution - as the House Journal put it, "the article known as the Howard Amendment." The vote was 82-19, Mr. Sykes in the affirmative. The Senate also approved that Amendment during its session beginning 4 p.m. the same day, with a vote of 34-2 (changed to 35-2, on July 3). North Carolina's legislative approval of the Amendment was directed to be "enrolled on parchment"

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Senate Journal (July, 1868), pp. 41f.

⁸
House Journal (July, 1868), p. 52.

then "forward[^] by the Governor [William Woods Holden], to the President of the United States, to the President of the United States Senate, and the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives."⁹

Much had been accomplished during this Session. Finally, on Monday, August 24, 1868, the 47th legislative day, the General Assembly adjourned to reconvene on the third Monday of November, 1868.¹⁰ Representative Thomas A. Sykes of Pasquotank would be present. More than that, Mr. Sykes, having completed his initiation as a legislator, had gained experience and maintained confidence among the electorate sufficiently for Pasquotank's voters to return him to office not only for the forthcoming Session[^] but also those of 1869-^{1870-1871 (on the 1868-1869 Session)} and 1871-1872. (J. G. Hamilton has him in the 1870-1871 Session.)[^]

What of Thomas Sykes's career after these North Carolina legislative sessions and other events affecting him, in between and during the years following? Other than ~~some~~ activities cited in another story alluded to earlier,¹¹ at this writing we only have access to data compiled by the late Monroe N. Work. He shows Sykes in Nashville, Tennessee nearly a decade later, continuing a role in politics.

⁹
Senate Journal (July, 1868), pp. 13-15 (text and deliberation), 16 (a certain Senator Wynne added his "aye" on July 3); House Journal (July, 1868), pp. 11-16 (Sykes's vote is p. 16), 18 (parchment direction).

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Sources for the narrative thus far, except as heretofore documented: the one-volume House and Senate Journals for the Session; specifically, House Journal (July, 1868), pp. [3], 29, 37, 56, 71, 81f, 101, 125, 187, 214, 219 (adjournment); Senate Journal (July, 1868), pp. 240, 253, 260. (Governor Holden of course addressed the Legislature; text, House Journal, pp. 6-7.)

¹¹
Present author's Gentleman from Pasquotank (unpublished MS), a story of Pasquotank Representative Hugh Cale, a Negro.

Work indicates that Sykes became one of at least two Negroes from Davidson County (embracing Nashville) to serve in the Tennessee House of Representatives during the 1870's and 1880's. His terms of office, according to Work, were "1877-79" and "1881-83." Our source reports, "Thomas A. Sykes was a native of North Carolina and had been a member of the North Carolina legislature." Further: "Mr. Sykes was Internal Revenue Collector in Nashville and came there with high revenue officials from North Carolina. He entered politics and was quite influential and finally died at Nashville."¹²

A man would surely have enhanced his image by having served some half-dozen terms in legislatures of two different states, besides being a federal office-holder - all within about fifteen years. In fact, for a Negro to have achieved this in the South of those times may be considered a distinct honor.

¹²

[Monroe N. Work]: "Some Negro Members of Reconstruction Conventions and Legislatures and of Congress," Journal of Negro History, V (1920), pp. 113, 114f. (Corrections and additions to his rosters appear elsewhere in the same Volume.)

The compilation inadvertently missed Pasquotank County although both that County and Mr. Sykes are referred to, ibid., p. 114, n. 31. Also, the compilation errs if one of its tabulations refers to North Carolina; that table shows no Negro Representative for 1891, when Hugh Cale of Pasquotank was in fact in the North Carolina House. (The quotation marks after Sykes's name, ibid., p. 113, appear now to be unnecessary, but one understands Mr. Work's caution in the interest of historical accuracy - one more instance of that giant's scholarly ability.)

It may be added that, in addition to Sykes and according to Work's compilation, the other and earlier Negro Representative from Tennessee's Davidson County was Sampson W. Keeble, serving in the Session of "1871-73" (ibid., p. 114).

Long distance efforts by the present writer failed to unearth additional data on Mr. Sykes's Tennessee sojourn. It is nonetheless quite probable that further efforts will bear fruit.

Thomas A. Sykes, Southern Negro, legislator, and historic figure who achieved such eminence, may some day become more visible to posterity. His activities would seem to fully justify such visibility, not to mention his being in a rare group: ^{among} the Nation's first Black legislators.

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