

Elliott, Robert B. (1842–1884)

South Carolina. Born free. Black. Literate. Lawyer, editor.



Elliott was one of the most brilliant political organizers in South Carolina during Reconstruction. According to older accounts, he was born in Boston of West Indian parents, but according to a more recent biography his birthplace was Liverpool, England, in which case he came to Boston on an English naval vessel shortly after the Civil War. He claimed to have studied at Eton College in England, but no record exists of his attendance. He was, however, well educated. Elliott worked briefly as a typesetter in Boston in 1867 and then came to South Carolina, where he married a member of the prominent free black Rollin family, became associate editor of the *South Carolina Leader*, and helped to organize the Republican party in rural areas. He also established a law practice in 1868. According to his law partner, Daniel A. Straker, Elliott “knew the political condition of every nook and corner throughout the state. . . . He knew every important person in every county, town or village and the history of the entire state as it related to politics.” Elliott served as chairman of the state Republican executive committee, 1872–79. “Some think he is the ablest negro, intellectually, in the South,” declared the *Chicago Tribune* (2 November 1872).

Elliott represented Edgefield County in the constitutional convention of 1868, and in the state House of Representatives, 1868–70. He also served as a county commissioner in Barnwell County, 1869–70, was appointed assistant adjutant general of the state militia in 1869, and was elected to the board of regents of the state lunatic asylum. He was president of the state labor convention of 1869. Elliott was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1870 and reelected in 1872. He served 1871–74, resigning in order to return to South Carolina and fight political corruption. He was elected to the state House of Representatives in 1874 and served as its speaker, 1874–76.

In Congress, Elliott eloquently condemned Ku Klux Klan violence and opposed measures to grant amnesty to former Confederate leaders. This, he said, “would be taken as evidence of the fact that this Congress desires to hand over the loyal men of the South to the tender mercies of the rebels.” Regarding the Klan, Elliott said in 1871: “Every southern gentleman should blush with shame at this pitiless and cowardly persecution of the negro. . . . It is the custom, sire, of Democratic journals to stigmatize the negroes of the South as being in a semi-barbarous condition; but pray tell me, who is the barbarian here?” His most celebrated speech was his defense, in January 1874, of Charles Sumner’s Civil Rights Bill. Elliott himself had been denied service in the restaurant of a railroad station on his way to Washington.

According to the census of 1870, Elliott owned \$5,500 in real estate and \$3,500 in personal property, but in 1872 he claimed to be “without money.” In that year, Elliott was defeated for election to the U.S. Senate by “Honest John” Patterson, who spent thousands of dollars to bribe legislators and who offered Elliott \$15,000 to withdraw from the race, which Elliott refused.

Elliott ran for state attorney general on the Republican ticket in 1876; after his defeat, he practiced law in Columbia. In 1879, he wrote Secretary of the Treasury John Sherman, requesting a government appointment because he was “utterly unable to earn a living owing to the severe ostracism and mean prejudice of my political opponents.” He received a low-level position as inspector of customs at Charleston. He attended the Republican national convention of 1880, and worked for Sherman’s nomination for president. In January 1881, Elliott and Straker headed a black delegation that met with president-elect Garfield to protest that Southern blacks were “citizens in name and not in fact” and that their rights were “illegally and wantonly subverted.” In May, Elliott was transferred to New Orleans by the Treasury Department. A year later, he was dismissed. He failed to make a living as a lawyer in the city and died penniless in New Orleans.

See Figures 1 and 4

Peggy Lamson, *The Glorious Failure: Black Congressman Robert Brown Elliott and the Reconstruction in South Carolina* (New York, 1973). *Congressional Globe*, 42d Congress, 1st Session, 102, 391–92. Robert B. Elliott to Franklin J. Moses, 23 November 1872, South Carolina Governor’s Papers, South Carolina Department of Archives. Robert B. Elliott to John Sherman, 23 June 1879, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress. Stanley P. Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt: Northern Republicans and the Southern Negro, 1877–1893* (Bloomington, Ind., 1962), 91–92. Abbott, “County Officers,” 38–39. Reynolds, *South Carolina*, 123, 222. Foner and Lewis, *Black Worker*, II, 24. Tindall, *South Carolina*, 43. Holt, *Black over White*, 108, app.