

Rapier, James T. (1837–1883)

Alabama. Born free. Mulatto. Literate. Planter, editor, lawyer, teacher.



One of Alabama's three black congressmen during Reconstruction, Rapier was born in Florence, Alabama, to a prosperous free black family. His father, John H. Rapier, had been emancipated in 1829 and conducted a successful barber shop in the town, accumulating some \$7,500 worth of property. An uncle, James P. Thomas, who gained his freedom in 1851, made a fortune speculating in real estate in Saint Louis. Rapier's brothers Richard and Henry attended school in Buffalo, New York, went west in search of gold, and took up farming in California. Another brother, John, Jr., edited a newspaper in Minnesota before the Civil War, emigrated to Haiti, returned to the United States in 1860, and later served as a surgeon in the Union army.

James T. Rapier spent much of his youth in Nashville, where his slave grandmother operated a clothes-cleaning establishment, and where he attended school. He went to Canada in 1856 for further education, worked as a teacher there, and was admitted to the bar. Rapier returned to the United States in the spring of 1865 and rented two hundred acres of land near Nashville. He attended the Tennessee black convention of 1865, as an advocate of black suffrage. In the following year, he rented 550 acres of land in the Tennessee Valley of Alabama. According to the 1870 census, he owned \$500 in real estate and \$1,100 in personal property. Later in the 1870s, he rented a cotton plantation in Lowndes County, Alabama, and had an annual income of over \$7,000.

Rapier was involved in Alabama politics from the beginning of Radical Reconstruction. He was chairman of the platform committee of the 1867 Alabama Republican convention, a delegate from Lauderdale County to the constitutional convention in that year (where he favored disenfranchising former Confederates), and an organizer of the Alabama Labor Union in 1871. The state's first black candidate for statewide office in 1870 (when his candidacy for secretary of state was blamed for the defeat of the Republican ticket), Rapier was elected to Congress in 1872, serving 1873–75. He failed to win reelection in 1874 and 1876. Between 1871 and 1873 he also served as assessor of internal revenue. He published the *Montgomery Sentinel* in 1872. In that year, on a trip to Washington, Rapier was forced to ride in the railroad smoking car and could not find anyone willing to sell him food at stations.

An outspoken advocate of black education and land ownership, Rapier expected the federal government to use its power to promote these goals. He proposed that Congress set up a land bureau to assist freedmen in obtaining land in the West, and he proposed a \$5 million appropriation for public education in the South. "Our only hope is a national system," he said in 1872. "We want a government school-house, with the letters U.S. marked thereon, in every township in the state."

A supporter of President Hayes's Southern policy, Rapier in 1878 was appointed collector of internal revenue. He campaigned against Redeemer rule in Alabama, calling for reform of the convict lease system, fair elections, and higher appropriations for public education. He supported the Kansas Exodus movement of 1879. Once a wealthy man, Rapier died penniless, having expended his fortune on black schools, churches, and emigration projects.

Loren Schweninger, *James T. Rapier and Reconstruction* (Chicago, 1978). Henry L. Suggs, ed., *The Black Press in the South, 1865–1979* (Westport, Conn., 1983), 24–26. Foner and Lewis, *Black Worker*, II, 136. Logan and Winston, *Dictionary*, 514–15.