A Short Road to Statehood, A Long Road to Washington

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In 2012, Nevadans elected the first African American in the state’s history to represent Nevada in the U.S. Congress, reelected the first Black Supreme Court Justice in the state’s history, elected one Black woman and two Black men to the Nevada State Senate, reelected five African Americans to the Nevada Assembly, and elected two African Americans (one of whom was reelected) to serve concurrent terms, for the first time, on the University of Nevada Board of Regents.

Almost 150 years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the proclamation by which Nevada was admitted as the 36th state in the Union on October 31, 1864, the election of U.S. Congressman Steven Horsford (dem.) marks a milestone in the state’s and the nation’s history. It is common knowledge that the first Black President of the United States, President Barack Obama, was reelected in the 2012 election. However, many people are not aware that 2012 is also the year that Nevadans elected the first African American to represent the state in the U.S. Congress in the state’s 149-year history. What may be even less well known is that Representative Steven Horsford’s successful election to Nevada’s fourth congressional seat also has national significance.

Nevada was admitted to the Union in 1864 as part of efforts to ensure the constitutionally required two-thirds majority to pass the Thirteenth Amendment, which made slavery illegal in the United States except as a punishment for crime. At the time Nevada was admitted, the state’s population was too small to meet the population requirement for statehood. Now in 2013, an African American, who represents a new congressional district created as a result of growth in the state’s population, will vote in the U.S. Congress on behalf of Nevada, a state whose votes helped to abolish the widespread practice of legal enslavement of Blacks in the United States.

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By Professor Rachel J. Anderson

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Blacks in Nevada Elections

By Professor Rachel J. Anderson

Over the years, Blacks have faced many uphill battles in Nevada elections. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, William M. Bird ran for mayor of Virginia City in the 1870 election. Mr. Bird was a well-known local barber and had been a political activist at a national level. Despite his popularity and position as an influential member of the Black community, Mr. Bird was subjected to disproportionately negative coverage in the local print media and a paucity of neutral or positive coverage. This and other challenges that have been present since statehood continue to be hurdles for Black candidates in Nevada to this day.

However, persistence, strategy, hard work, and being a qualified candidate can pay off. Over the years a small but growing number of Blacks, among them LVNBA members, have been elected to statewide and local offices in Nevada. In the 2012 election cycle, a number of LVNBA members ran for public office. They included Justice Michael Douglas, Senator Aaron Ford, Assemblyman Jason Frierson, Assemblyman William Horne, Attorney Phung Jefferson, Attorney Jonathan MacArthur, Assemblywoman Dina Neal, and Attorney Marsha Kimble Simms.

LVNBA Members also participated in the 2012 elections by disseminating information about voting rights, registering voters, offering their offices for the training of election observers, poll watching, driving voters to the polls, answering calls in the Obama campaign boiler room and on voter information hotlines, and hosting debate watch events and open forum discussions.

Rachel Anderson is an Associate Professor of Law at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) William S. Boyd School of Law, Vice President of the LVNBA, and a member of the NBA. She earned her J.D. from the University of California, Berkeley School of Law and her M.A. from Stanford University.

Claytee White is a historian and the Director of the Oral History Research Center at UNLV Libraries. She received her bachelor’s degree from California State University Los Angeles, master’s degree in history from UNLV, and has completed work toward a doctorate at the College of William & Mary.

Selected Sources for the Nevada 2012 Special Series

Books

Nevada State Bar Magazine

Oral History Transcripts
- Oral histories from interviews of Aaron Ford, William Horne, and Joseph M. Neal, Jr. on October 5-9, 2012 housed at the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association (LVNBA) Archive at the Wiener-Rogers Law Library at the UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law and the African-American History Collaborative Collection at the Oral History Research Center at UNLV Libraries Special Collections.

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