

Mississippi Black History Makers

Revised and Enlarged Edition

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Josiah T. Settle

Orator, Lawyer, and Legislator

The Honorable Josiah T. Settle was born September 30, 1850, in the Cumberland Mountains, while his master-father Josiah Settle and slave-mother Nancy Settle were en route from North Carolina to Mississippi. As soon as circumstances would permit, they continued their journey and settled in Mississippi; thus he claimed that as his native state. The father, a descendant of the famous Settles of Rockingham, North Carolina, was a widower when he began raising a family by his former slave. Being devoted to his children and their mother, he manumitted them several years after arriving in Mississippi. After being informed that the laws of the State forbade free Negroes residing therein, Settle left in March 1856 for Hamilton, Ohio, where he relocated and purchased a home for them. He spent summer vacations with his family in Ohio and maintained his Southern plantation the latter part of the year.

Another problem arose concerning his relations with his slave family. His northern neighbor informed him that he had to discontinue the relations with the neighbor's family unless he married the mother. He immediately replied: "That is what I have always desired to do." In 1858 his slave mistress, Nancy, became his lawful wife in a ceremony witnessed by their children, who became his legitimate heirs.

The advent of the Civil War in 1861 brought Settle northward where he remained until he died in 1869. Thus began the Northern existence of Josiah T. Settle, affectionately known as Joe. Because there were no colored schools and only a few colored families in Hamilton, Ohio, Joe attended the white school. Although the law stipulated that black citizens were entitled to enroll in white schools, if the county did not provide a separate school for them, desegregated schools were unacceptable to Ohio whites. Therefore, when Joe enrolled in the white school, he had to learn how to defend himself against the racism of white students and his white instructors.

Finally, relief came when a liberal Christian woman and excellent teacher took charge of the school and took a warm interest in him. Joe soon became deeply attached to her, and he soon began excelling in class. She first inspired him with a desire for something more than a country schoolhouse education. In the spring of 1868, he enrolled

in Oberlin College. His freshmen peers chose him as class orator, an honor coveted by most students. Then tragedy struck: during the spring of 1869 his father died. Subsequently, at the end of his freshman year, he left Oberlin and went to Washington where he entered the sophomore class of Howard University. His college years at Howard were rewarding. During his first year there, Joe taught in the preparatory department. Then for two years he clerked for a white man in the educational division of the Freedman's Bureau. Toward the latter part of his senior year, he was elected reading clerk of the House of Delegates, a branch of Washington's territorial government. At the time of his graduation he was performing his duties as reading clerk, teaching two classes a day at the University, and pursuing his own studies. Immediately following his graduation from Howard University in 1872, he joined the law department, took an active part in district politics, and held several public positions, including clerk for the Board of Public Works until its expiration and trustee of the county schools for the District of Columbia.

In the presidential campaign of 1872, Josiah Settle canvassed several counties in Maryland, where his youth and brilliance created a sensation. He delivered speeches in Dayton and Cleveland, Ohio, in support of Ulysses S. Grant's candidacy for president. Soon after the presidential election, Josiah graduated from the Howard Law School. He was admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia but decided to relocate in Mississippi. He left Washington for Mississippi in March 1875. After successfully passing the state's law examination in Vicksburg, he was admitted to the Mississippi Bar and located at Sardis, in the northwestern Mississippi county of Panola and formed a law partnership, Settle and Matthews.

He later returned to Washington and married Miss T. T. Vogel-sang, a refined and cultivated lady from Annapolis, Maryland, already distinguished for her superior mental qualities. He returned south with his bride and commenced his law practice.

In August 1875 he was unanimously nominated by the Republican convention for District Attorney of the Twelfth Judicial District in Mississippi, in which there was a Republican majority of 2,500 but was unexpectedly defeated. As a member of the State delegation to the National Republican Convention in Cincinnati in 1876, he was elected the State at-large Republican elector for the Hayes-Wheeler ticket. Instead of supporting the Hayes-Wheeler ticket, he voted for Roscoe Conklin as the Republican presidential nominee. At the con-

vention, he seconded the nomination of Stewart L. Woodford of New York for Vice-President. Again in 1880 Settle was chosen as Republican elector on the Garfield-Arthur ticket.

In 1882, at the behest of some party members in Jackson and Washington, he was strongly urged to represent the Republican party as their congressional candidate from the Second Congressional District. At the state convention Settle declined the honor, however, and nominated General James R. Chalmers, who had recently moved to the Second District. Chalmers received the nomination and was elected by a clear majority.

In 1883 a coalition of Republican and Democrats made a fusion ticket for county officers and members of the legislature. Vigorously opposing such a coalition, Settle bolted and became an independent candidate for the legislature. During that campaign he made the most brilliant efforts of his career. Even though he was opposed by the ablest speakers of both parties on every stump in the district, he enthralled the voters and won election by more than a twelve hundred majority vote.

During his tenure in the legislature, Settle was regarded as one of the ablest men in the House, earning the respect and admiration of his colleagues for his oratorical abilities. At the adjournment of the legislature he was presented a gold-headed cane, as a token of his esteem.

After that legislative session, he temporarily abandoned politics and devoted his time to the practice of law. In 1885, he moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and about two months later was appointed Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Court of Shelby County. On several occasions he received compliments from the court bench. In the meantime, he steadily built a reputable law practice.

One observer commenting on Settle's oratorical eloquence and power of persuasion remarked, "That young man is too eloquent to be a prosecutor for the State, because the jury would be so blinded by his eloquence that the opposing counsel could not persuade them to give a verdict of acquittal."