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| **Worksheet A: Robert Elliott Biography Analysis** | | |
|  | Discussion Questions – Jot down your thoughts | What questions/observations do you have? |
| Born 1842 in Liverpool, England. Educated in British public schools.  Skilled as a typesetter, and served in British Navy. | *Why might this background be relevant to his later emergence as a American black leader?* | * *One of the key challenges facing newly freed Americans was the inability to receive an education while enslaved. England, which eliminated slavery long before the U.S., offered Elliott an education that would not have been available to many black Americans. This lack of education was one of many barriers to bright and motivated newly freed Americans being able to enter political office.* |
| By 1867, was living in Charleston, South Carolina as an associate editor for the *South Carolina Leader,* a freedmen’s newspaper, and emerged as leader at South Carolina Constitutional Convention in 1868. | *How might this background have allowed him to emerge as a black leader? What key skills did he have?* | * *In addition to his solid core education, Elliott honed his skills in writing and analysis as an editor. He was well informed about current and historical events given his role at the newspaper. As a professional member of the black community, his election to participate in the state’s Constitutional Convention gave him both visibility and connections to other politicians and influential members of SC political and social elite.* |
| Later in 1868, was elected to Barnwell County, SC Board of Commissioners (only black member) and then to SC State House of Representatives. | *What challenges do you think he faced as the only, and then one of the only, black men in these positions? Were there any advantages?* | * *How difficult it must have been to know that you were in such a stark minority. Who would be his ally in passing legislation? Would other legislators give fair airing to his views? Would his views be heard on their own merits or would he be seen as a token minority representative? Should he “come out swinging” or move slowly to try to build friends and allies? One potential advantage is that this was not the first time he found himself in the political minority and he had an education and skills that equaled those of his white peers.* |
| Admitted to South Carolina Bar (i.e. given license to practice law in SC) in 1868 (self-studied). | *What words would you use to describe Elliott knowing about this accomplishment?* | * *While it was not as unusual then for someone to pass the state bar without formal legal training as now (witness Abraham Lincoln), it was an extraordinary accomplishment for a black man in these early years post-Civil War, especially when considering his very active political engagement and demanding employment. Words: motivated, intelligent, hard working, determined, focused, driven.* |
| In 1870, was Republican nominee for U.S. House of Representatives in the district seat once held by Representative Preston Brooks (committed caning assault on Senator Charles Sumner in 1856). Won and was sworn into 42nd Congress in 1871. | *What is ironic about this fact?* | * *Preston Brooks symbolized the South’s opposition to federal movements to eliminate slavery before the Civil War, turning to violence in the very halls of the Capitol to oppose Charles Sumner. The fact that a black Congressman (who, as will be shown later, had close ties to Sumner himself) would represent the same district after the War is ironic.* |
| Was darker-skinned than the other African-American representatives. “I shall never forget [my first day in Congress],” Elliott later recalled. “I found myself the center of attraction. Everything was still.” (Office of History). | *Why might his skin color be significant? What feelings might he have had about entering the U.S. Congress? How do you interpret the quotation about his first day in Congress?* | * *During slavery, light-skinned* *African Americans might try to pass as white to be able to move freely in society. The deeper the color of one’s skin, the more readily was one identifiable as “the other.” Darker-skinned men and women had even more difficulty being accepted in white society than lighter-skinned African Americans. When Elliott says, “Everything was still” he is referring to how no one spoke when he entered a room, just staring at him. Imagine entering the cafeteria on your first day in a new school and having everyone turn to you and stare without talking. How alone he must have felt.* |
| Served on Committee on Education and Labor. Active in *challenging* the Amnesty Bill (to re-establish full political rights of former Confederates) that ultimately passed. He also was vocal in *supporting* the Ku Klux Klan Bill (designed to stop terrorist activities of this group), which also ultimately passed. | *Given his background, how would he feel about being appointed to this committee? Why would he have taken the stances he did on each bill?* | * *The facts suggest that Elliott worked hard to obtain and continue his education and believed that education was very important to his personal success as well as to his role in representing black Americans.* * *He opposed the Amnesty Bill because he believed that it would be more difficult for newly freed Americans to influence politics in the South if former Confederates, who opposed the end of slavery much less equality for black Americans, had full voting privileges and were able to hold political office. He supported the bill designed to stop the activities of the KKK which was a terrorist group focused on intimidating black Americans to not participate in the political process (among other goals).* |
| Given his political activism at this time, felt his life was in danger and he gave instructions to his wife in case of his death. | *Knowing what you know about him so far and reflecting on this fact, what three adjectives/phrases would you use to describe Elliott?* | * *Brave, committed, in danger, fearful, risk-taker, a planner* |
| Reelected in 1872 with 93% of the vote. Helped pass Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner’s Civil Rights Bill (passed as the Civil Rights Act of 1875) focused on preventing discrimination on public transportation, and in public accommodations and schools. Was opposed by Southern Democrats who argued that federal government had no constitutional authority to enforce civil rights. | *Think about Elliott living in Washington and working in Congress. What specific personal experiences can you imagine he had that would have been altered by passage of this Bill?* | * *Elliott was a black man working in a largely white man’s profession at the time (politics). Given the climate of the time and the fact that a bill to prevent discrimination in public places was necessary, Elliott likely experienced not being served (or feeling unwelcome) in some restaurants and hotels. He may have had difficulty hailing horse-drawn cabs or omnibuses. He would likely have felt excluded even if invited to socialize with his white peers. This is not to say that his support for the Bill was merely personal, but rather that despite the accomplishment of being elected to Congress, even he would still have experienced significant segregation and discrimination in his activities of daily living.* |
| Delivered eulogy for Senator Sumner in Boston’s Faneuil Hall in March 1874. | *What are some of the connections to Sumner that might have resulted in being chosen for this honor?*  *From evidence presented in this brief bio:* | * *He strongly supported Sumner’s Bill.* * *As a black man, he held the seat of the man who had, prior to the War, brutally beaten Sumner for Sumner’s abolitionist views.* * *One could also infer that he was the epitome of Sumner’s hopes: a bright, motivated black man effectively participating in a free America.* |
| Increasingly frustrated with corruption in SC Republican Party that was allowing Democrat Party to gain inroads. Resigned from U.S. House of Representatives in 1874. Won seat in SC State Assembly, later serving as state attorney general. | *Why could corruption in his party cause him to decide to resign?* | * *Elliott had to work hard to achieve his accomplishments despite many in the South who were hoping to return to the pre-Civil War economic and political system. No matter how hard working or smart Elliott and other black Americans were, if the system was corrupt, they could not rise on their own merits. One can imagine that he was disillusioned if even the Republican Party, the party advocating for racial equality, was subject to being paid off.* |
| Lost political position in Bargain of 1877 when Reconstruction collapsed. Remained politically active and struggled to make a living with his law practice until his death, in poverty, in 1884. | *What does this last piece of his biography imply about the life of an educated, politically active black American in SC after Reconstruction?* | * *It is difficult to imagine someone with more drive, intelligence, and desire to make a positive change than Robert Elliott. And yet, when presidential protection in the form of the military was removed from SC in the Bargain of 1877, even Elliott was unable to succeed in a system that tipped backward in time with Jim Crow laws. After the first blush of success in early Reconstruction, black politicians struggled to be elected and have a commensurate impact until well into the 20th Century.* |