Revels, Hiram R(hoades)

(b. Sept. 1, 1822, Fayetteville, N.C., U.S.--d. Jan. 16, 1901, Aberdeen, Miss.), American clergyman and educator who became the first black citizen to be elected to the U.S. Senate (1870-71), during Reconstruction.

Born of free parents, young Revels traveled to Indiana and Illinois to receive the education that was denied him in the South. He was ordained a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1845 and eventually settled in Baltimore, Md., where he served as a church pastor and principal of a school for blacks. Soon after the Civil War began (1861), he helped organize two volunteer regiments of blacks for service in the Union Army. Two years later he joined the Federal forces to serve as a chaplain to a black regiment stationed in Mississippi.

After the war Revels settled in Natchez, Miss., to preach to a large congregation. Despite some misgivings about entering politics, he accepted appointment by the military governor as alderman (1868) and was later (1869) elected to the state senate. Although Revels was a Republican, he was anxious not to encourage race friction with white Southerners; he therefore supported legislation that would have restored the power to vote and to hold office to disenfranchised members of the former Confederacy. In January 1870 he was elected to the U.S. Senate to fill the unexpired term of the former Confederate president, Jefferson Davis. He performed competently in office, advocating desegregation in the schools and on the railroads.

On leaving the Senate, Revels became president of Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, a recently opened institution of higher education for blacks, near Lorman, Miss. In 1874, however, he was dismissed from the college presidency. In 1875 he helped overturn the Republican (Carpetbag) government of Mississippi, defending his action on the grounds that too many politicians in that party were corrupt. He was rewarded by the Democratic administration, which returned him to the chief post at Alcorn in 1876, where he remained until his retirement.