

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

Oscar Stanton De Priest

congressman, activist

"I've been elected to congress the same as any other congressman, and I'm going to have the rights of every other congressman — no more and no less"

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Background Information

Born: March 9, 1871

Death: May 12, 1951

De Priest was born in Florence, Alabama to Alexander and Mary De Priest. He decided to leave the dangers of the South and moved to Kansas. As a child, Oscar went to public school and studied bookkeeping. When he turned 17, he moved to Chicago, Illinois where he worked as a painter, decorator, and later became a real estate investor.ⁱ

De Priest's Resistance

While living in Chicago, De Priest recognized the need for Black leadership in their local government. He began advocating for candidates and helped them receive votes. De Priest organized the newly incoming Black population in exchange for a secretary job. In 1904, De Priest was elected to the Cook County Board of Commissioners. His position inspired Black people because he fought for their rights. In 1914, he became the first Black member of the Chicago city council.ⁱⁱ

In 1928, Illinois Congressman, Martin Madden, suddenly died of a heart attack and De Priest was chosen to replace him during the election. De Priest was then elected by the people to become the first Black Congressman from a northern state. He served three terms where he was the only Black representative of 435 people. While in Congress, De Priest "fiercely advocated for civil rights; spoke out against segregation, Jim Crow laws and other injustices harming the lives of Black Americans; championed the 14th Amendment; and sought a national anti-lynching law."² While De Priest faced discrimination from his fellow Congressmen, he fought for the rights of Black people across the country. His work paved the way for many Black people to run for Congress and actively change the governmental structure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Achievements

DePriest served as the first Black Congressman to serve from a northern state. As a congressman, DePriest left a legacy of strong commitment to advocating for the civil rights and economic independence of his African American constituents.

ⁱ Stokes-Hammond, S. (n.d.). *Pathbreakers: Oscar Stanton DePriest and Jessie L. Williams DePriest*. WHHA (En-US). <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/pathbreakers-oscar-stanton-depriest-and-jessie-l-williams-depriest>

ⁱⁱ Johnson, C. A. (2020, February 14). *Oscar Stanton De Priest, Chicago's first black alderman*. Chicago Tribune. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-flashback-oscar-stanton-de-priest-first-black-alderman-20200214-trs4owfhf5dfdkckssu5n2yfy-story.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ *DE PRIEST, Oscar Stanton*. (n.d.). US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives. <https://history.house.gov/People/Detail/12155>