Oscar James Dunn was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1826. He belonged to that class of Negroes who were known as free people of color. From most accounts it is said that he was born a slave and that he “emancipated” himself by running away when a boy. However, it is probable that he was the child of a free Negro woman and hence was freeborn. The identity of his father is unknown. The child took the name of Dunn from a mulatto whose wife his mother subsequently became.

His mother kept a lodging house in New Orleans where most of the residents were actors and actresses and musicians. Although he had no formal schooling, he apparently learned to read and write from the theatrical folk. From them he also gained some musical training, becoming a skillful violin player.

While very young he served a rigorous apprenticeship as a plasterer. He also learned the trade of house-painter. The life of an apprentice before the Civil War was very much like that of a slave. During the time that an apprenticed person was learning his trade he might be whipped cruelly, or otherwise punished severely.

When Dunn was fifteen years of age he ran away from the man to whom he had been apprenticed. The knowledge Dunn had acquired of painting and plastering enabled him to make a comfortable living for many years. Towards the end of the Civil War, however, he opened an employment office where “good servants and field-hands” were hired out. About this same time, he also organized a bakery company with a capital stock of $10,000.

Dunn took a leading part in the early struggle of Louisiana Negroes for the ballot. He was one of the founders of the Universal Suffrage Association, and treasurer of its State Central Committee. In 1865 he took money from his own pockets and gave freely of his time in order to carry out the first registration of Louisiana Negroes for voting purposes.

Because of Dunn’s prominence in local Negro affairs, and perhaps because of his experience as a labor agent, he was given a position by the Freedmen’s Bureau as a traveling agent. He traveled through Louisiana in this capacity, visiting cities, towns, and plantations, studying labor conditions.

At a time when farm laborers were paid $15.00 a month and often cheated out of that, Dunn was very active in unearthing many hidden abuses of the plantation system. He later served as a member of the Advisory Committee of the Freedmen’s Bank of Louisiana.

Dunn made his entrance into politics in 1867 when he became one of the first Negroes to serve as assistant city alderman. His prominence among Negro and white groups fighting for Negro suffrage made him the logical choice for a high State position when the Republican Nominating Convention met in 1868, and he was nominated as Lieutenant-Governor on the Conservative Republican ticket. After the adoption of a new State Constitution, Henry Clay Warmoth, a youthful white
carpetbagger, was elected governor and Dunn was elected Lieutenant-Governor in April 1868. Dunn also served as President of the Board of Police Commissioners of New Orleans; worked for the Racial Integration of the New Orleans public schools in accordance with the provisions of the 1868 Constitution; member of the Board of Trustees of Straight University and was a Grand Master of the all-Negro Free and Accepted Masons of Louisiana.

As Lieutenant-Governor, Dunn was also President of the Senate, and as the head of that body exhibited great knowledge and talents which commanded respect and praise. He was not eloquent as a speaker, but he was so remarkable for his sound judgment and opinions that men of all parties asked his advice on questions of State. He placed honesty and love of his fellowmen above personal gains, and he always remained a poor man.

He later became involved in a bitter factional strife among Louisiana Republicans. He was a leader in the “customshouse group,” which included numerous federal appointees and had the support of President Grant. In the early stages of the internal feuds in the Republican party, P. B. S. Pinchback, the most conspicuous colored politician in Louisiana in this period, was identified with the faction which Dunn opposed. Pinchback continued for a time to cooperate with Warmoth while Dunn was increasingly alienated from him. In furthering his own political ambitions, Warmoth was making a bid for the support of white Democrats. Dunn accused the governor of planning to sell out the interests of the recently enfranchised Negro voters. In the contest Dunn had widespread popular support not only because he championed the rights of Negroes, but because he was a native Louisianan, whereas Warmoth was an outsider. At the Republican State Convention which met on August 9, 1870, Dunn had the support of the majority of the delegates and was elected presiding officer in a contest with Warmoth. It appeared that Dunn was in a strong position to become the Republican nominee for the governorship in 1872 but his life was cut short.

At the height of his struggle for decency, honesty, and equality, Dunn died on November 22, 1871, after he had served three of his four years in the second highest office of the State. One of the largest crowds ever assembled in the State attended his funeral the next day. Among his pall-bearers were three former Governors of Louisiana, the Mayor, the Postmaster, and the Collector of the Port. A eulogy delivered in the United States Senate declared that “Duty with him was more than riches”.

The “Dunn Hall Cafeteria” on Southern’s campus is named in his honor.


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