Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback

Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback (P.B.S. Pinchback), was born on May 10, 1837, the eighth child in a family of ten. He was a freeborn black who was a Union officer in the American Civil War and a leader in Louisiana politics during Reconstruction (1865–1877). He was the son of a white Holmes County, Mississippi planter William Pinchback (who later moved to Virginia). His mother, Eliza Stewart, was of mixed blood and known as 1mulatto. She was his father’s slave, the property of Major Pinchback, who became enamored with her. Eliza was later freed by Pinchback and later died at the age of seventy in 1884. Major Pinchback went to Philadelphia with his slave wife and 2manumitted her. Though freed, she did not abandon the father of her children but returned with him to his home, which was in Virginia. It was while in transit from Virginia to Mississippi, in 1837, that Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback (P.B.S. Pinchback) was born free. Major Pinchback purchased a plantation in Holmes County, Mississippi, and moved his illegitimate son there. P.B.S. Pinchback was born on May 10, 1837 while his family was in-route to Mississippi, near Macon, Georgia.

His young life was eventful. In 1846 Pinckney and his older brother Napoleon were sent to Cincinnati, Ohio, to attend Gilmore’s High School. Two years later (1848) they returned home and their father Major Pinchback died the same year. His mother with five children, Napoleon, Mary, Pinckney, Adeline and the baby girl, were sent to Cincinnati by the administrator of his father’s estate. They were hastily sent away, and to prevent any attempt to enslave them by the white heirs to the estate, who ruthlessly robbed them of their right inheritance of a goodly fortune, the family was in financial straits.

In Cincinnati, Ohio, Pinchback’s older brother, Napoleon, became mentally ill, forcing the responsibility of providing for the family on him. He was only twelve years of age when this occurred. His search for a job that took him to the waterfronts where he found work as a cabin boy on a canal boat. He worked on the canal boat from 1854 to 1862. His proficiency in this capacity caused him to be promoted to the rank of steward, the highest rank a black man could attain on the riverboats during the days of slavery. This was his profession until he jumped ship in 1862, near Natchez, Mississippi, and slipped through the Federal blockades into New Orleans.

On May 16, 1882, he had difficulty with his brother-in-law, John Keppard, who was wounded on the blockade. The civil authorities arrested him, but he provided bail. While awaiting trial, the military authorities rearrested,

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1 Mulatto: a person of mixed white and black ancestry, especially a person with one white and one black parent.
2 Manumitted: the act of a slave owner freeing his or her slaves.
speedily tried and convicted him for assault with attempt to murder and sentenced him to two years in the workhouse. May 25, 1862, he was committed and on August 18, 1862, released to enlist in the *First Louisiana Volunteer Infantry*. Pinchback enlisted in the First Louisiana volunteers, a white regiment of the Union Army. General Benjamin F. Butler issued a call for the recruitment of free black men to be organized into an effective fighting force. Pinchback was given permission to recruit and organize them. He did this and received a commission as Captain in the United States Army. He was assigned to the *Twentieth Corps d’Afrique*. His stand for equal rights and privileges for the men under his command made his short stay in the army “stormy and eventful.” At that time Negroes of New Orleans were permitted to ride only in those street-cars which had a large star painted upon each side. But Pinchback’s bold demand that Negro soldiers be allowed to ride in any car often held up long lines while he argued with the mule-drivers. Protests such as this finally opened up all street-cars to Negro soldiers and civilians. Because of the discriminatory treatment of colored officers and troops, he left the army when the commissions of Negro officers were recalled.

Once the war was over, he decided to involve himself actively in the political arena. During his twenty years in politics Pinchback held more offices than any other Negro in the United States.

- A member of the Louisiana Constitutional Convention of 1867-1868, and in that capacity he introduced free-tax supported schools, universal suffrage, and the Thirteenth Article of the State’s constitution which guaranteed civil rights to all persons (see below);

- He was elected to the State Senate from 1868 to 1871 where he fought for the adoption of a law prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations;

- A delegate to the 1868 Republican National Convention;

- In 1870 he founded the New Orleans, Louisianan, a newspaper which continued publication until 1881;

- In 1881 elected president Pro Tempore of the state Senate as a consequence succeeded to the position of Lieutenant Governor when the incumbent, Oscar J. Dunn, died;

- From December 9, 1872 to January 13, 1873, he was acting Governor for the state during the integral when the white carpetbagger governor, *Henry Clay Warth*, was suspended because of impeachment proceedings.

- He was elected to the United States Senate in 1872, but was not seated. During his unsuccessful fight for a seat in the Senate, he revived his newspaper, the New Orleans *Louisianian*, and published it thereafter for more than a decade;

- In 1877 he was appointed a member of the State Board of Education by Governor Nicholls;

- On February 8, 1879, he was appointed by Commissioner Green B. Raum, Internal Revenue agent
On March 5, 1879, he was elected delegate from Madison Parish to the Constitutional Convention of the State of Louisiana, and he resigned his Internal Revenue agency position to assume the new position.

In 1880 he was elected by the Republican State Convention from the State-at-large, to the Republican National Convention, held in Chicago, June 3 - 8, 1880;

On February 24, 1882, he was appointed Surveyor of Customs for the Port of New Orleans by President Chester A. Arthur, and confirmed unanimously by the Senate without reference to the committee;

In 1883 he was appointed a member of the Board of Trustees of Southern University by Governor S. T. McEnery, a Negro institution. This institution, the finest and best in the State for the education of colored people, was made under the constitutional requirement by the State convention of 1879, through an article introduced in that body by Pinchback.

In 1884 Pinchback was elected a delegate from the State-at-large to the Republican National Convention held in Chicago from June 1 - 6, 1884;

In 1885 he was re-appointed by Governor McEnery as member of the Board of Trustees of Southern University.

On July 2, 1885, he resigned from the surveyor’s office and

In the Fall of 1885 he entered the Law School of the State University (Straight University), and upon completion of his studies was admitted to the Louisiana Bar on April 10, 1886.

Pinchback settled in Louisiana and joined the Republican Party of blacks and radical whites. His political career was launched April 9, 1867, when he organized the Fourth Ward Republican Club in New Orleans. As a prominent individual in that section, he was elected a delegate to the Republican State Convention held in June of that same year. Because he was very articulate and a natural leader, he was elected to the Central Executive Committee of the party and was a delegate to the State Constitutional Convention. Also, in 1867 Pinchback was the author of a very important Civil Rights article of the Constitution that helped to create Southern University and A&M College. It reads:

“All persons shall enjoy equal rights and privileges upon any conveyance of a public character; and all places of business, or public resort, or for which a license is required by the state, parish or municipal authority, shall be opened to the accommodation and patronage of all persons, without distinction on account of race or color.”

The article was adopted by a vote of fifty-eight (58) to sixteen (16). Pinchback took an active part in the entire convention and affixed his signature to the final draft of the Constitution on March 7, 1868. After the convention, Pinchback campaigned for state senator and was defeated by E.L. Jewell, a Democrat. Pinchback claimed that there was evidence of fraudulent conduct in the election. Henry Clay Warmoth, Pinchback’s friend and political ally had won the gubernatorial race in the election of 1868. Warmoth convinced the legislature to
air Pinchback’s case. It was discovered that he had received the majority of the votes cast in the second senatorial district. Based on these findings, he was given the senatorial seat held by his opponent, E.L. Jewell. In 1871, Pinchback became President Pro Tempore of the State Senate.

When Oscar J. Dunn, Lieutenant Governor who also was black, died in office in November, 1871 and had defeated Pinchback in an election three years earlier, Pinchback moved by constitutional succession to the state’s No. 2 office under Louisiana’s carpetbagger governor, Henry Clay Warmoth.

In the 1872 election, Warmoth supported President Grant’s opponent, Horace Greeley. But Grant won, and the next month the Louisiana legislature brought impeachment proceedings against Warmoth. From December 9, 1872 to January 13, 1873, Pinchback served as acting Governor of Louisiana for [36] days while impeachment proceedings were in progress against Henry Clay Warmoth. In the meantime, Pinchback went into business and acquired control of a Republican paper, the New Orleans Louisianan. Pinchback was replaced by Governor Kellogg.

In January, 1873 the Legislature elected Pinchback to the U.S. Congress, but his Democratic opponent contested the election and won the seat. His claim to the seat was contested for three years. It was finally decided that he did not have a legal claim to the seat. He was awarded the sum of $16,026.90 to compensate for the slow deliberation of Congress in disposing of his case. Later, he was elected to the U.S. Senate, but he was again refused the seat amid charges and countercharges of fraud and election irregularities—although some observers said it was the color of his skin that counted against him. A fiery speech which he is said to have delivered in the Senate, September 3, 1870, and in which he quoted as threatening to “lay the city in the ashes,” is said to have hurt his political possibilities.

In 1877, the white Louisianans took complete control of the government of Louisiana, and Pinchback’s regime came to an end. He left the Republican Party in 1877 to support Governor Francis T. Nicholls and the Democratic Party. He continued to be active in politics on a national level, and held several appointive positions. At the age of fifty he decided to take up a new profession and entered Straight College in New Orleans, Louisiana to study law; he was subsequently admitted to the bar. Disillusioned with the outcome of Reconstruction and the return to power of the traditional white hierarchy, he moved to Washington, D.C., where he remained active in politics.

For a short period between 1892 and 1895 Pinchback was a U.S. Marshal in New York City. He later moved to Washington, D.C., where he received several honors and was active in politics.

In 1898 he participated in the unveiling of the Frederick Douglass Monument in Rochester, New York.
William Edward Burghardt DuBois (W.E.B. DuBois) said of Pinchback: “To all intents and purposes he was an educated, well-to-do, congenial white man, with but a few drops of Negro blood, which he did not stoop to deny, as so many of his fellow whites did” (Black Reconstruction in America 1935, p. 469). He dressed elegantly, was urbane in manner, and an eloquent speaker.

In 1860 at the age of twenty-three he married Emily Hawthorne, a free woman of color and the couple had six children, of whom two died in infancy, Pinckney born in 1862, Bismarck born in 1864, Nina born in 1866, and Walter Alexander born in 1868. His grandson was Jean Nathan Toomer, one of the Harlem Renaissance’s most brilliant writers, and fiction writer arranged for Pinchback’s body to be buried in the family vault at the Metairie Ridge Cemetery.

Pinchback died in Washington, D.C., on December 21, 1921, and is buried in Metairie Ridge Cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana.

The “P.B.S. Pinchback Engineering Building” on Southern University and A&M College campus is named in his honor.


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