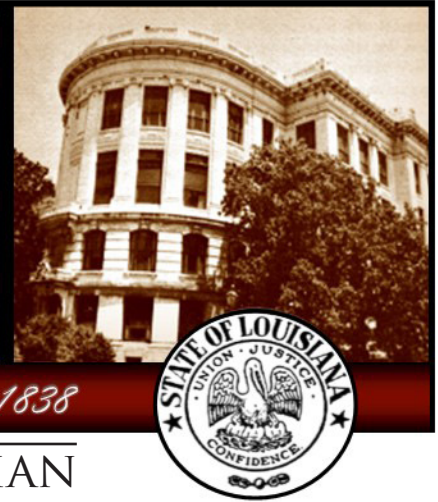




DE NOVO

The Newsletter of
The Law Library of Louisiana



2022 Unsung Heroes - Issue #1

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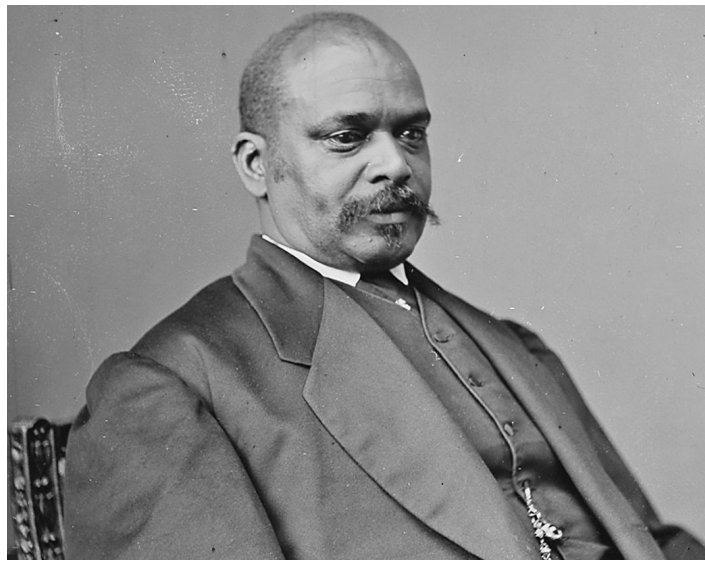
OSCAR JAMES DUNN – UNSUNG POLITICIAN

by Miriam Childs

Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice John L. Weimer, along with the associate justices, are pausing to celebrate and give honor to Black History Month. A former educator who served on the Board of the Louisiana Center for Law and Civic Education, Chief Justice Weimer is dedicated to promoting universal awareness and understanding of the justice system.

This is the first of four special Black History Month issues of De Novo, the newsletter of the Law Library of Louisiana, that will be distributed statewide by the Louisiana Supreme Court. Each issue will feature an "Unsung Hero" whose work, though less well-known than others, nonetheless contributed to the progress of civil rights in Louisiana. This week's honoree is the first African American to serve as Lieutenant Governor in Louisiana as well as in the United States, Oscar James Dunn.

Oscar James Dunn was born in 1822 in New Orleans to an enslaved woman named Maria. James Dunn, a carpenter by trade and a free person of color, married Maria, and then purchased the freedom of Maria, Oscar, and his sister. After her emancipation, Maria operated a boarding house for actors. Oscar received a solid education until the age of 14, when he became a plasterer's apprentice. Dunn's family could afford to provide him private violin lessons, and he later became skilled enough to teach other students. Dunn's work



Oscar James Dunn, Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana. Courtesy of [National Archives, #527896](#).

as a skilled plasterer led him to leadership positions in African American Masonic lodges. Dunn was an avid student, and was well-read in the law.

Dunn keenly watched the political landscape change in Union-occupied New Orleans. He joined the Louisiana Republican Party in 1863, and was elected to its Central Committee. His was a "radical" voice advocating for African American legal equality, education, and male suffrage. Toward the end of the Civil War, Dunn opened an employment agency for freedmen to hire workmen out at fair wages.

In 1865, he worked with the Universal Suffrage Association to register African Americans in Louisiana to vote. Dunn took positions in organizations that enabled him to be involved in the economic and social activities of freedmen. He was a Freedmen's Bureau investigating agent, Secretary of the Advisory Committee for the Freedmen's Savings and Trust Company, and a member of the Freedmen's Aid Association of New Orleans. Dunn took up the cause of those left orphaned by the war by serving in the Louisiana Association

continued on page 2

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OSCAR JAMES DUNN – UNSUNG POLITICIAN (CONT.)

continued from page 1

for the Benefit of Colored Orphans. In 1866, he organized the People's Bakery, a cooperative endeavor that was an attempt to establish African American financial independence.

The July 1866 Mechanics Institute Massacre in New Orleans proved to be a turning point in Reconstruction politics. Radical Republicans held a meeting in support of voting rights for freedmen at the Institute. Dunn was warned not to go. A white mob attacked African American supporters headed to the Institute. Dozens of supporters were killed by the mob, which included a large number of policemen. Dunn later testified about the incident before a Congressional committee sent from Washington. The committee concluded that ex-Confederates in the local government were behind the massacre. This tragedy, along with other instances of violence against African Americans in the country, pushed Congress to override President Andrew Johnson's veto and pass the Reconstruction Acts. The South was divided into military districts with commanders in charge.

In 1867, the commander of the Fifth District, General Philip H. Sheridan, appointed Dunn to the New Orleans Board of Aldermen. Dunn's fellow Aldermen elected him to the judicial post of Assistant Recorder

of the city's 2nd District Court. Dunn drafted an ordinance to integrate New Orleans public schools. Though the motion ultimately failed, a similar law was enacted during the 1867-1868 Constitutional Convention. Dunn also used his talents to establish an efficient firefighting system; change the authority structure of City Hall; and created City Council rules for operation.

Meanwhile, Congress approved Louisiana's new constitution, and elections were held. Dunn was drafted to run for Lieutenant Governor with Henry Clay Warmoth, a Republican from Illinois, and their ticket won the election. As Lieutenant Governor, Dunn was also President *pro tempore* of the Senate, the only formerly enslaved person to serve in that body. Dunn presided over the state legislature's civil rights bills and the state's ratification of the 14th Amendment. Dunn also served as a member of the Printing Committee and was the president of the Board for the Distribution of Pensions to Veterans. As Governor Warmoth's support for equal rights waned, his actions ultimately created divisions in the Republican Party, alienating Dunn and Dunn's supporters. Warmoth had appointed Democrats (ex-Confederates) to key positions and vetoed a civil rights bill. Warmoth eventually lost control of the Executive Committee, and

leadership fell to Dunn. Dunn also secured leadership of the Republican State Convention. The anti-Warmoth "Customhouse Group" faction of the Republican Party included many federal appointees and had President Ulysses S. Grant's support. This group moved to abandon Warmoth. Warmoth's supporters attempted their own convention, which didn't meet the approval of the President and most Republican state officials.

Political strife at home didn't prevent Dunn from gaining a positive reputation in Republican circles around the country. He was known for the honesty and integrity he brought to political life. In April 1869, Dunn was invited to the White House for an audience with President Grant, the first African American dignitary to receive such an invitation. Unfortunately, Dunn's rising star was cut tragically short. After attending a public dinner, Dunn became violently ill and passed away two days later on November 22, 1871. His death was shocking in its suddenness. Dunn's symptoms were allegedly typical of someone who had been poisoned with arsenic, and speculation about the cause of his death – including murder – was rife. "Congestion to the brain and lungs," or natural causes, became the official cause of his death, but four of the seven doctors attending to Dunn refused to sign off on it. Nevertheless, the family

declined an autopsy. Dunn left behind his widow, Ellen, and her three children that he adopted. Dunn's funeral was held in New Orleans at St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church on North Roman Street. The Louisiana state house, public schools, city hall, and all federal buildings closed to show respect. His funeral procession was reportedly the largest in New Orleans history. There were at least 50,000 mourners, and the interracial second line stretched for a mile from Claiborne and Canal, the location of Dunn's home, to Magazine Street. Some historians say that Dunn could have become a United States senator or a candidate for Vice President. In 1873, the Louisiana Legislature passed Act 57, setting aside \$10,000 to build a monument in Dunn's honor, but the monument was never built.

The life and work of Oscar J. Dunn is covered in a newly published graphic novel entitled *Monumental: Oscar Dunn and his Radical Fight in Reconstruction Louisiana* by Brian K. Mitchell, Barrington S. Edwards, and Nick Weldon, and published by the Historic New Orleans Collection. Additionally, Brian K. Mitchell's 2011 dissertation provides a well-researched history of Oscar J. Dunn, and can be accessed here:

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2413&context=td>.