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The Republican Party of Texas

- Black History -

Matthew Gaines (1840 – 1900)



Matthew Gaines

The Republican Party of Texas has its share of trailblazers, but Matthew Gaines is indeed one to remember. He's a true definition of perseverance. He was born into slavery on a plantation in Pineville, Louisiana. Determined to learn to read, Gaines used candlelight by night, reading books smuggled to him by a boy who lived on the same plantation.

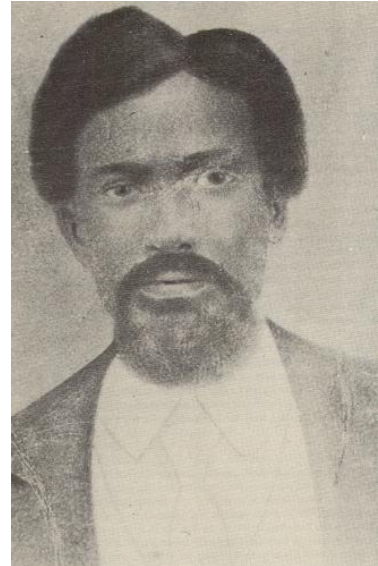
He would not stop there as he had a desperate thirst for freedom. This thirst was so great, he acted on it, escaping the plantation, not once, but twice to gain his freedom! Unfortunately, he was caught and returned to slavery both times.¹

Interestingly, during his second escape attempt, he attempted to get to Mexico but was captured by the Texas Rangers and taken to Fredericksburg where he enslaved and worked as a blacksmith and a sheepherder. He would eventually gain his freedom along with other slaves in the United States after the Civil War. Taking full advantage of his new freedom, Gaines would quickly establish himself as a leader in the Black community, both as a minister and politician, settling in Burton, Texas.²

Although Texas was not where Gaines started, it would be in this state he would make some of his most impactful contributions to Black people and society. Most of his greatest feats would come while working as a Republican politician. He was passionate about the advancement of Black people and used his positions and

influence to address issues such as education, prison reform, the protection of Blacks at the polls, the election of Blacks to public office, and tenant-farming reform.³ Ensuring he held people accountable for their own advancement as well, Gaines would encourage educational and religious groups to work towards educational improvement in their own communities.

He would eventually become the first Black Texas State Senator (1870) from Washington County. He was elected from his district three consecutive times and was constantly looking after the interests of Black people while serving the state greatly in his Senate capacity. Sen. Gaines was a very powerful speaker and spoke seven different languages.⁴ He used his skills and intellect to do the following:



Matthew Gaines

- Fought diligently for the passage of the Militia Bill (which would provide for a State Guard / State Police).
- Sponsored a bill calling for tax exemptions for education and religious groups. Additionally, the bill would exempt taxation on buildings and equipment used for charitable and literary associations.⁵
- Sponsored a joint resolution to make it a misdemeanor to sell within six miles of a college intoxicating liquors.
- Fought hard to garner support for electing a Black Texan to the U.S. House and Senate, though unsuccessful in his efforts.

Sen. Gaines recognized how the Black voting bloc helped Radical Republicans win elections throughout Texas. However, when White Radical Republicans had the opportunities to make political appointments, blacks were overlooked. Further, when they had chances to nominate Blacks for Federal offices, they were silent. Sen. Gaines, therefore, stood against fellow Senate Republicans (the Radicals) in defense of Blacks against Whites, accusing them of the following:

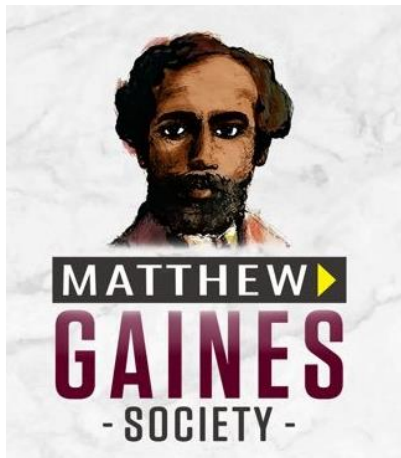
1. They did not elect a Black person to the United States Senate when they had the power to do so.
2. They failed to elect a Black man to be Lieutenant Governor of Texas.

3. They did not given Blacks any office which carried honor and emoluments with it.
4. When a Black man was elected to an office requiring a bond, they refused to go on his bond, thus preventing him from accepting his duties.⁶

Sen. Gaines was a part of the Texas Twelfth Legislature, representing Washington County and the Sixteenth District. He would vehemently fight against providing separate schools for whites and blacks, making many speeches in the Legislature against any such law! A lasting quote from Sen. Gaines noted, "...if Negro men were good enough to occupy seats in the Legislature with white men, then Negro children were good enough to occupy seats in the same school room with white children." It was documented that several Republican newspapers sided with Senator Gaines and his assessment.⁷

Nevertheless, one of the longest-lasting impacts Sen. Gaines had on Texans still impacts millions today, his efforts which lead to the creation of Texas A&M. When Texans think of the many great Agricultural and Mechanical (A&M) colleges and universities, Sen. Gaines should quickly come to mind! It was Sen. Gaines who fought hard and displayed leadership which was instrumental in assisting the 12th Legislature in maximizing uses of the Land-Grant College Act (Morrill Act) of 1862.

It was from this act that Texas A&M was birthed (1871). Texas A&M was opened on October 4, 1876, as the state's first public institution of higher education and Sen. Gaines deserves much credit.⁸ Not only Texas A&M but also the Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Prairie View A&M (1876) recognizes Sen. Gaines as foundational to their existence as well.⁹



In January 2021, Texas A&M reported students raised more than \$350,000 to erect a statue on campus to honor Sen. Gaines. Additionally, Bus Route 36 was recently renamed after him.¹⁰ Texas A&M also has The Matthew Gaines Society on campus to honor Sen. Gaines.¹¹ A man who was born into slavery in Louisiana, becoming a Texas State Senator roughly 30 years later, in the 1800s, left such an impact that he is still being discussed and honored today! Like many more people, the Republican

Party of Texas is honored to have such a Trailblazer as part of the abundant history of this party!

As always, there is so much more which can be learned from the rich history of Texas Republican politics. It is therefore paramount, that the lessons of the past be sought, thus ensuring a more prosperous and sounder future for generations to come. Thank you for taking the time to take embark upon this journey through history. Remember, *History Matters!*

Endnotes

¹ Pitre, Merline. Matthew Gaines. Texas State Historical Association. Handbook of Texas.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Brewer, Mason J. (1935). Negro Legislators of Texas, pp. 51-52.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brewer, Mason J. (1935). Negro Legislators of Texas, pp. 48-51.

⁷ Ibid, p. 52.

⁸ Texas A&M, The History of Matthew Gaines. Retrieved on February 6, 2021, from <https://studentaffairs.tamu.edu/matthew-gaines-history/>.

⁹ Texas A&M, University of Art Galleries. Matthew Gaines Retrieved on February 6, 2021, from <https://uart.tamu.edu/gainesbio/>.

¹⁰ Falls, Clay (2021). Matthew Gaines Statue coming to Texas A&M soon, new diversity report to be released this month. KBTX-TV. Retrieved February 6, 2021, from <https://www.kbtx.com/2021/01/19/matthew-gaines-statue-coming-to-texas-am-soon-new-diversity-report-to-be-released-this-month/>.

¹¹ Texas A&M, The Matthew Gaines Society. Retrieved on February 6, 2021, from <https://studentaffairs.tamu.edu/matthew-gaines-statue/>.