Descendant recalls first black elected to House from La.

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WASHINGTON — They say some ghosts wander the earth in pain from life's unfinished business. So perhaps the spirit of a Louisianaan, John Willis Menard, has finally quit pacing the halls of Congress and has laid himself down to rest because an old injustice has been partly righted.

Ten days ago, when U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, lifted his right hand and his voice to take the oath of office for the House of Representatives, he was, in a way, standing in for Menard.

Like Jefferson, Menard was black and from New Orleans. Like Jefferson, Menard stood on the House floor one winter day as a new Congress began its work. But unlike Jefferson, Menard was not allowed to take the oath of office or the seat which had been awarded him by New Orleans-area voters.

The congressional decision not to seat Menard apparently turned solely on the issue of race. A congressional investigator declared that the time had not yet come to admit "a Negro" to the U.S. House.

But Menard did give a speech. According to newspapers of the day, it was the first time a black ever addressed the Congress.

It was 122 years ago, in February 1869. The newspapers reported Menard's calm eloquence, and the stir Menard caused in a Congress which apparently had not considered that a black man of its era could be well-spoken.

The House declared Menard's seat vacant. But it also showed some sympathy for the Louisianian, authorizing that Menard be paid part of what would have been his salary.

And at some course in the investigation by the House Elections Committee, Menard was invited to, or allowed on, the House floor. There, he spoke up for his right to the congressional seat.

The bare outlines of Menard's story — that he was elected and that he was denied his seat — are confirmed by Donald Kennon of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society. The details of Menard's one day in the Congress, and other details of an apparently colorful life, have been gathered through the research of a descendant, Menard's great-granddaughter, Edith Menard, 71, of Washington, D.C.

According to Edith Menard, part of her great-grandfather's congressional speech was printed in a black church publication, and the publication was placed in a box of family mementos and stayed there until she found it.

From the old document, this is at least a partial transcript of what Menard, a Republican, told Congress more than a century ago:

[Handwritten notes]
I appear here more to acknowledge this high privilege than to make an argument for the House. It was certainly not my intention at first to take part in this debate at all. But as I have been heretofore the only voice of nearly 80,000 of the electors, I would find myself recreant to the duty imposed upon me if I did not defend their rights on this floor.

I wish it well understood before I go any further that in the deposition of my case I do not expect, nor do I ask, that there shall be any favor shown me by any of my race, or the former condition of that race.

Menard said his case was improperly before the House because his challenger had not followed the House's procedural rules for a timely challenge and had never notified Menard about the challenge.

Edith Menard said accounts of the speech were carried by the New York Herald, the Cincinnati Commercial and the Washington, D.C., Union newspapers. She quoted from some of the newspaper accounts:

- From the New York paper: "A man of African blood was allowed to speak in the House of Representatives during legislative proceedings. Mr. Menard sat in Allison's seat during the debate on his case and, when allowed an opportunity to speak, delivered what he had to say with a cool readiness and a clearness that surprised everybody."
- From the Washington paper: "A colored man appeared for the first time in the House of Representatives on Saturday of last week to ask to be recognized in having a right to a seat in the body. It being the first time a colored man had spoken in the House, the Democrats were, for the moment, almost struck dumb with amazement. Mr. Menard spoke calmly and distinctly and was attentively listened to."
- From the Feb. 28, 1869, Cincinnati paper: "We had a scene in the House yesterday that marked an epoch in the annals of this country. Mr. Menard of Louisiana, the colored claimant to a seat, was heard in his defense. Mr. Menard is of medium height, well proportioned figure, has a blood about half and half of the races, an intelligent face, a nicely developed head physiologically considered, and a clear voice."

The Cincinnati paper also said the House reacted with "surprise" at Menard's speech and manner. "Calm, self-possessed, he avoided all ordinary attempts at oratory and gave in good sense and choice phrase his reasons for a claim to a seat in Congress," the newspaper reported.

Six years after Menard's rejection, Charles Edmund Nash, who was born at Opelousas, would become the first Louisiana black to serve in Congress from 1875 to 1877.

But P.B.S. Pinchback, Louisiana's only black governor who served during Reconstruction, would suffer Menard's humiliation. The Louisiana Legislature appointed Pinchback to the U.S. Senate, but the Senate refused to seat him.

James Lewis, another black from Louisiana, was chosen for the Senate, but possibly influenced by Pinchback's experience, refused to go to Washington and never claimed his seat.

William Jefferson is the first black Louisiana to serve in Congress since Reconstruction.

Menard eventually moved to Florida, where, according to Edith Menard, he served in the state legislature from 1874 through 1875.

He said he also bought a Key West newspaper and moved it to Jacksonville, where he named it the Southern Leader. People tend to forget that not all 19th century blacks were slaves and illiterate, Edith Menard said. She said her great-grandfather had some Caribbean ancestry, was born in Illinois in 1838, attended school in Illinois and at least some college, she believes.

From what she knows of Menard's writings, and it includes a book of poetry, held by the Library of Congress, Edith Menard said he was not just for the rights of blacks. He was for the rights of all people. He was a matter of dignity of people. His writings don't reflect any animosity toward anyone. He felt people should sit down and talk things out and negotiate through the press.

"We (her family) are labeled black," said Edith Menard. "But we're well mixed. We're creoles."

The whole topic of racial labeling seems to cause her some perplexity, some irritation and some pure delight. With a little delicious chuckle, she reports on a telephone call from a previously unknown cousin in Florida: "I want to know what color I was, because she's passing." She means the cousin has "passed" for white, and now that she's elderly she's considering leaving an 80-unit condominium to her relatives. But she is apparently also giving some thought to her matter of "well mixed" heirs.

Edith Menard, "I told her about my Maryland bank account. I said Send the money, I don't have to go to Florida."

Edith Menard believes her opened-minded outlook about race reflects the values of her great-grandfather. A retired school teacher who still substitutes in the classroom, Edith Menard lays claim, too, to Menard's gift of language and, in general, to his flair and his apparent joy in living.

She said she has tracked Menard through several white collar jobs in the federal government, but she didn't get many of those. And she's tracked Menard's travels.

"He was an orator," she said. "He was very dramatic, and he just loved to travel on steamboats. He was a raconteur of high standing."

To boost herself, Edith Menard said, "I'm of peachy complexion and have silver hair, and I'm a stylish old lady, even though I'm 71 years old. We're good-looking people, we creoles."

It's one of many references which touch on Edith Menard's link to Louisiana. She pays occasional attention to politics in the state, and she cherishes letters received from former U.S. Rep. Lindy Boggs of New Orleans.

She does not know William Jefferson, who was elected to the seat vacated by Boggs' retirement. But she did say she's thrilled about his election, and she asked a lot of questions about his background.

Given a brief biographical sketch of Jefferson that included his studies at Harvard, Edith Menard erupted, "Wonderful. You don't get any better than that."

Edith Menard disclosed that she just might try to join Jefferson in the House. Washington, D.C., has a non-voting congressional delegate, and I am thinking about running in 1992," she said. "In fact, I think I will run." But Jefferson, a Democrat, makes it clear that he won't welcome someone like Edith Menard's candidacy. Like her great-grandfather, she would run as a Republican.

Edith Menard lives in what she calls "this knee-jerk Democratic town," but she said, "The Republicans have all the money, and they will back you in the six figures, and I need that for television."

Edith Menard said she'd be running "only for the history, really." She said no other candidate could be tied to the first black American to stand up and speak in the Congress.

Editor's note: Raymond Lockett of Southern University, Virginia Smith of the Louisiana State Library and Ulysses Richard of Amtai Research Center at Tulane University provided background and sources of information for this article.