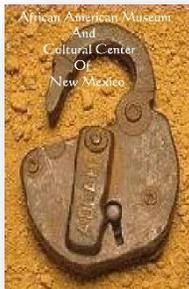


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Jay Moses Griffin: New Mexico's Unknown African American Political Trailblazer

Jay Moses Griffin was an accomplished newspaper editor and a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute who became one of the first African Americans to attend the University of Minnesota Law School. After arriving in Albuquerque, New Mexico due to illness, Griffin became a prominent African American political leader during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and was known as an eloquent speaker throughout the New Mexico Territory up until his death at the age of twenty-seven. This article will detail Griffin's impact and influence in New Mexico.

EARLY LIFE & EDUCATION

Griffin was born in Opelika, Alabama in April of 1874 at the tail end of the Reconstruction Era. According to U.S. Census records, both of his parents were also born in Alabama and he may have had ties to Texas but little is known about his early life or upbringing.

Before arriving in Albuquerque, Griffin attended the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institution in Tuskegee, Alabama which was founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington, one of the most celebrated and influential African American intellectuals in history. This institution would later be renamed Tuskegee University. After graduating from the Tuskegee Institute in 1896, Griffin was admitted to the University of Minnesota Law School which had just graduated

its first African American law student, John Francis Wheaton two years prior. Griffin's acceptance would make him only the second African American to be admitted to the law school. While a law student, Griffin created two African American newspapers. The first was the *Twin City American* which was consolidated with another African American newspaper- the *Colored Citizen* and became the *Afro-American Advance*.

During the summer of 1899, Griffin would become severely ill with tuberculosis, a disease caused by bacteria that severely attacks the lungs. Griffin was ordered by his doctor to relocate to New Mexico for its dry and sunny climate which was thought to be ideal for those suffering from the disease. As he prepared to leave Minnesota for New Mexico, Griffin would transfer his interests in the newspaper over to Joseph C. Reid, his law school classmate and the president and chief editor of the paper and withdraw from school.

ARRIVAL IN ALBUQUERQUE

Griffin arrived in Albuquerque on July 14, 1899. He found his first residence at 215 West Carroll Avenue. This street no longer exists and the Kiva Auditorium at the Albuquerque Convention Center covers this area today. Griffin wrote a letter to Reid which appeared in the July 29th issue of the *Afro-American Advance*. He

describes his first impressions of Albuquerque, stating: *“Four days in Albuquerque, among the Mexicans and Indians with few Afro-Americans and Chinamen for full measure, fully convince me of the fact that I am not in dear old Minnesota...”* He then begins to describe the small but prosperous African American community: *“...The Afro-American constitutes but a very small proportion of the population here; but what few there are here, all seem to be doing well and it is claimed that those who want work never have any trouble getting it. Some are engaged in small business enterprises, and so far, as I have been able to observe, are meeting with success...”* He goes on to mention Joe Ball, a successful African American shoemaker who owned a shoe shop on Railroad Avenue (now Central Avenue): *“...One of the most successful business men in the city is a colored man who is engaged in the boot and shoe business. He enjoys a very liberal patronage here and wields a great influence over the entire community. Both white and black point to him with pride and any of them will tell you that ‘Mr. Ball’ is one of the most solid and worthy citizens of Albuquerque. He is a purely ‘self-made man,’ and the respect that he commands here could be enjoyed by all of our people, in my opinion, if they merit it as he does...”*

POLITICAL CAREER & NEW MEXICO'S FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN NEWSPAPER

By the beginning of 1900, Griffin had quickly become the most prominent political and social leader in Albuquerque's African American community and had started to develop a reputation as a skilled and dynamic orator throughout the New Mexico Territory. In February, he became president of the Colored Republican Club (also referred to as the Colored Political Club). The 1900 U.S. Federal Census lists Griffin as living as a 'lodger' in the home of William H. Joyce, an already established and active member of the African American community at 414 West Tijeras Road. This space is now covered by the Century Plaza building in downtown Albuquerque. It was common for African Americans who were new to a city to

rent a room in the homes of already established African American residents as many white landlords refused to rent to non-whites. In June of 1900 the *Albuquerque Citizen* newspaper announced that Griffin and Joyce would begin publishing a weekly newspaper to be named the *Albuquerque American*. It would be published *“...in the interest of the Afro-Americans of New Mexico...”* Griffin would be editor of the paper while Joyce would serve as business manager. The newspaper would make its way to St. Louis where the editor of the *St. Louis Palladium*, an African American newspaper, complemented the publication calling it *“well edited and quite newsy.”* The *Albuquerque American* is the first known African American newspaper in New Mexico.

Griffin continued to keep in contact with Reid and *The Afro-American Advance* in Minnesota. An article in the July 14, 1900 issue of the paper reported that Griffin's health was improving and that he had elected to stay in Albuquerque: *“...The climate of New Mexico has practically restored his health, and as evidence of his gratitude to the Providence that brought him out here, also of his faith in the future of New Mexico, he has concluded to remain in the ‘land of sunshine’ and cast his lot with the people of the ‘wooly wild west’...”*

With his health seemingly improved, Griffin was able to return to the University of Minnesota to receive his law degree in 1900. Griffin also continued to get involved with various organizations in Albuquerque. In August of 1900, he was elected to be the first secretary of a newly formed iteration of the Albuquerque Press Club. The club was comprised of the editors and publishers of the various newspapers in Albuquerque and its purpose was to provide hospitality for members of the New Mexico Press Association who would be in town for their first annual banquet during the New Mexico Territorial Fair (currently known as the New Mexico State Fair). Joyce was also a member of this new club. An article reporting on the banquet in the September 20th edition of the *Albuquerque Journal* mentions that Griffin *“...spoke eloquently of Afro-American*

journalism...”

Griffin began to immerse himself into New Mexico’s political scene by the later part of 1900. In October, the Republican Territorial Convention was held in Santa Fe, New Mexico with Griffin serving as one of fifteen delegates for Bernalillo County. Another notable Bernalillo County delegate was attorney Bernard S. Rodey, founder of the Rodey Law Firm which today is one of New Mexico’s oldest, largest and most respected firms. *The Santa Fe New Mexican* newspaper described what the delegates experienced as they arrived at the capitol in Santa Fe: “...Upon arriving at the capitol, the different delegations, aggregating 110 out of a possible 116, passed up the broad marble stairways in the south wing of the building leading to the hall of representatives on the third floor, and were ushered into the convention hall through private entrances on the south side without the slightest confusion or delay. Once inside of the arena prepared for their deliberations, the delegates found themselves on the floor of the most beautiful chamber in the southwest ...” Griffin was also appointed to the Committee on Resolutions during the first day of the convention.

On October 4th, the final day of the convention, Rodey was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as a Republican Delegate from the New Mexico Territory after the two other potential delegates declined to accept candidacy in favor of Rodey. Griffin played an instrumental role by speaking in Rodey’s favor. An article in the *Albuquerque Citizen* newspaper detailed the

event: “...The Bernalillo County delegation worked hard in caucus for Mr. Rodey...J.M. Griffin made a remarkably eloquent speech for Rodey and all the candidates withdrew in Mr. Rodey’s favor...”

Only a few days after returning from the Republican Territorial Convention, Griffin was appointed by the Republican Central Committee to be one of ten speakers, which also included former New Mexico Territorial governor, L. Bradford Prince, to address audiences in various

sections of the Territory in the interest of “republicanism, wise government and prosperity.” By the end of October, the *Albuquerque Journal* reported that Griffin would begin to travel throughout the northern part of the New Mexico Territory to deliver a series of speeches for the benefit of African American voters:”...Mr. J.M. Griffin, editor of the *Afro-American* paper in this city, will hold a series of meetings in the northern part of the territory, beginning in Raton on the 20th. His speeches will be delivered mainly for the benefit of the colored people, but as Mr. Griffin is one of the best informed and best educated gentlemen in the territory, as well as a

ready and eloquent speaker, his addresses will be found interesting to other voters, as well as those of African descent, and he deserves to have full houses wherever he speaks...”

The beginning of 1901 saw Griffin continue his political aspirations. January 21st marked the beginning of the 34th Legislative Assembly of the New Mexico Territory. Griffin was unanimously elected to be Journal Clerk of the



Photo of Jay Moses Griffin from the *Afro-American Advance* newspaper.

60-day session. The *Albuquerque Citizen* described Griffin as: "...the accomplished editor of the Afro American newspaper. He is an excellent penman, and is well qualified to discharge the duties of the position..." At the Republican city primaries held on March, 23rd, Griffin and Joyce were elected to be part of a group of fifteen delegates to represent Albuquerque's Fourth Ward at the city Republican Party Convention.

DEATH

In April of 1901, it was announced that Joyce had stepped down from his role as business manager of the *Albuquerque American* and Griffin would assume all responsibilities of the newspaper. By June, Griffin would once again become very ill as he did in Minnesota exactly two years prior. Perhaps the stress of running an entire newspaper singlehandedly coupled with his various political responsibilities reagravated the disease that attacked his lungs. Griffin was able to act as master of ceremonies for the Emancipation Day festivities held at Albuquerque's Robinson Park on August 6th however, just three weeks later, he was again reported to be seriously ill with pulmonary trouble and was staying at the home of Elizabeth A. Patterson Black, an African American widow and long-time resident of Albuquerque.

Griffin's health would not improve. The *Albuquerque Journal* reported that he left Albuquerque for Texas on October 3rd: "...J.M. Griffin, a brainy newspaper man and an eloquent speaker, left yesterday morning for his old home in Texas, seeking improvement for his failing health..." A few weeks later, at the young age of twenty-seven, Jay Moses Griffin would finally succumb to the disease that he valiantly fought for over two years. News of his death quickly swept through the New Mexico Territory and also reached as far away as New York. Many who knew him spoke kindly of his leadership, intellect and cheerful personality.

Bernard S. Rodey, who had become a Delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives thanks in large part to Griffin speaking on his behalf, was likely one of the first people to receive the news of his death from Griffin's mother in Texas. The *Albuquerque Citizen* would provide a lengthy report of Griffin's death: "...Delegate Rodey received a dispatch today from the mother of J.M. Griffin at Pilot Point, Texas, giving information of his death from consumption. Mr. Griffin was editor of the *Albuquerque American*, a graduate of Booker T. Washington Institute and a young man of bright prospects before consumption fastened itself upon him. He was the journal clerk for the legislative council and made many friends all over the territory. He was the leader of the Afro-Americans of this city, and was beloved by all his race in this vicinity. Peace to his ashes..."

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* also reported on the news of his death: "...J.M. Griffin, publisher and editor of the *Albuquerque American*, and journal clerk of the house of the 34th Legislative Assembly, died at Pilot City, Texas of consumption. Mr. Griffin was a bright young man of the African race, who as editor of the *Albuquerque American*, was a power for good to his race. His exemplary habits and cheerful resignation during his illness won him the friendship of many..."

Joyce and other members of the Colored Republican Club drafted resolutions of condolence on the death of their dear friend: "...Whereas, The Supreme Ruler of the Universe has seen fit to remove from us our late esteemed and honored president, J.M. Griffin; therefore, be it resolved, that his relatives have our heartfelt sympathy in their hour of affliction. Resolved, that we mourn the loss of a faithful friend and leader in our club and will hold his name in fond remembrance. Be it further resolved, that a copy of these resolutions be sent to the bereaved family, one to the *Albuquerque Daily Citizen* for publication, and that a copy be spread on hour minute book ..."

Jay Moses Griffin lived his short life committed to providing a voice for African Americans in every community in which he lived. In spite of the health troubles he faced, Griffin remained steadfast and focused on African American political advancement. Had illness not slowed him down, Griffin would have undoubtedly continued his ascension as a revolutionary voice in the New Mexico Territory and would have

been at the political forefront during New Mexico's admission to the Union.

Jay Moses Griffin devoted his short life and career to providing a voice for African Americans and should be remembered as a dynamic young leader and intellectual, an eloquent orator who had the ability to galvanize people into action and an unheralded New Mexico trailblazer who was ahead of his time.

Kyran Worrell

Kyran Worrell
AAMCCNM Board Member



About Kyran Worrell

Kyran Worrell is a native New Mexican, born in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is a graduate of Highland High School and received his Bachelor's degree in Africana Studies from the University of New Mexico. He is currently pursuing an MBA with a concentration in finance from the UNM Anderson School of Management. He has worked in various departments at UNM including the Office of University Counsel, the UNM School of Law and UNM Medical Group.

Kyran enjoys researching the African American history of New Mexico with an emphasis on Albuquerque. He is married to Tillie Worrell and is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.