

## Museum Around the Corner

### Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Joseph Hayne Rainey was born on June 21, 1832 to Grace and Edward L. Rainey. His mother was of French descent which gave Joseph a lighter skin tone. In 1846 the family moved to Charleston where Mr. Rainey worked as a barber at the Mills House Hotel. Mr. Rainey was able, finally, to purchase freedom for his family. According to the Historic Georgetown County Commission, the status of freed blacks in the nineteenth century was difficult. "They were envied by slaves, distrusted and feared by whites, the price they paid for freedom was more than monetary. They were not citizens, but were taxed and restricted far more than if they had been. Yet, in spite of the obstacles, a few free blacks were able to overcome their problems to an extent and become important members of society." Giving official instruction to read and write to black children was illegal. Joseph Rainey received a limited education and his father taught him the barber's trade.

In 1859, on a trip to Philadelphia, Joseph met and married a part-French girl named Susan. They had three children, Joseph II, Herbert, and Olivia. Living in Charleston when the War Between the States began, Joseph was conscripted for a time as a steward aboard a Confederate blockade runner. When he was assigned to building Confederate fortifications in Charleston Harbor, he began planning an escape for his family. They fled to Hamilton, Bermuda where he operated his own barber shop and Susan set up a dressmaking business. They prospered in both endeavors and "Barber's Alley" was named for Joseph.

As he grew older, he continued to educate himself through the help of friends who loaned him books. When the war ended, he heard that there was a better life for blacks in the United States and returned to Georgetown. In 1867, Joseph launched his political career. After holding office in the state Republican Party, he was elected to the State Senate. In 1868, he was appointed to fill a seat in the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. He continued to be elected and served until 1880. His moderate policies were met with approval by both African-American and white voters, and he was elected without opposition to the 43rd Congress (1873–1875). Joseph is the very first African American to be elected and to serve in Congress and the only African American to this day to be Speaker pro tem of the House of Representatives.

In 1874, a St. Louis newspaperman described Rainey as "a light mulatto with regular features; bright genial eyes; pleasant expression; broad clear brow; and a profusion of silky hair. He was of medium height, with a graceful and easy carriage and with very small hands which he used effectively in gesturing. He was courteous and suave rather than aggressive, but could defend himself well if necessary. As a speaker he was fluent and even eloquent on occasion, moderate but earnest, and held his own with opponents even in impromptu debate."

With violence against black people increasing in the South, in 1874 he purchased a "summer home" in Windsor, Connecticut. As a U.S. Representative from South Carolina, he could not use

Windsor as his primary residence, but he moved his family there for their safety. The "Joseph H. Rainey House", a c.1830 Greek Revival, is located at 299 Palisado Avenue (it is used as a private residence). It was designated as one of the 130 stops on the Connecticut Freedom Trail, established in 1996 to highlight the achievements of African Americans in gaining freedom and civil rights.

Joseph Rainey retired from the House of Representatives on March 3, 1879. He worked for the Treasury Department until 1886. Finally, tired and in ill health, Joseph Hayne Rainey returned to Georgetown, but only survived one more year. He lived his final days in his home at 909 Prince Street, and died on August 2, 1887. It is recorded merely that he was buried "in the Baptist Cemetery," and the exact location is unknown, a poor tribute to the courageous, dignified man who had forged a new path for his struggling race.

The Joseph Hayne Rainey house at 909 Prince Street has been elevated to be a National Historic Landmark, the only one in the city and is currently a private residence.