

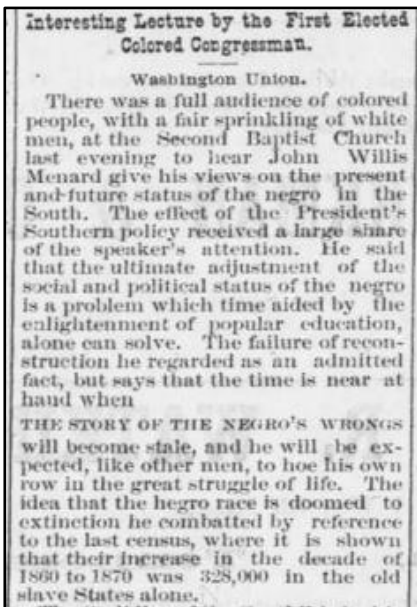
# John Willis Menard

*Newspaperman, Politician, and Census Clerk*



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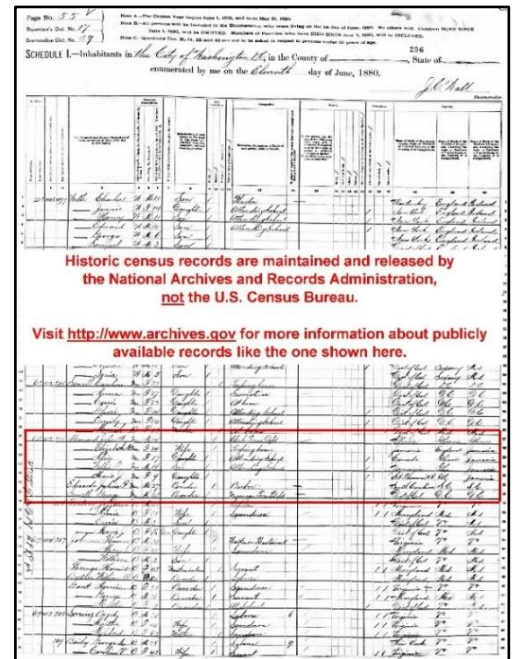
John Willis Menard was born on April 3, 1838, in Kaskaskia, Illinois, just seven years before flooding of the Mississippi River forced a relocation of the town. John's relations included New Orleans Creoles as well as brothers Pierre and Michel Menard, the latter of whom founded Galveston, TX. Born free and educated in schools for free blacks, John worked as a farm hand before enrolling at Iberia College, Ohio, in 1859. In 1863, as the Civil War raged, John briefly joined the Army as a hospital steward, before receiving an appointment to the Interior Department's Immigration Bureau. However, this groundbreaking posting came with a cost and John soon resigned due to harassment from fellow employees. He then sailed for British Honduras (present day Belize), in the employ of the British Honduras Company, in order to survey the country and see if it



*The Herald and Mail*  
(Columbia, TN) February 1, 1878.

The U.S. Census Bureau is proud of its history of continually evolving to ensure an accurate count of the people of the United States. To accomplish this, the Census Bureau has long embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce representative of local communities and the people who were a part of the neighborhoods that they counted. For this reason, census work was often one of the few government jobs open to minorities. Beginning with the 1870 Census (the first after the abolition of slavery), the Census Bureau began hiring African Americans as enumerators and data processors. With the creation of a permanent Census Bureau in 1902, Black workers and statisticians found an environment with an inclusiveness far greater than many contemporary institutions.

John returned to the United States following the end of the Civil War in 1865, and settled in New Orleans and established a newspaper, *The Free South* (later renamed *The Radical Standard*). On his return trip, he had passed through Jamaica, where he met his wife, Elizabeth, with whom he would raise a family. In New Orleans, John also became involved in politics. After the 1868 death of Congressman James Mann of Louisiana's 2<sup>nd</sup> District, John ran as the Republican in the ensuing special election. Despite John winning a clear majority, his opponent challenged the results all the way to the U.S. House of Representatives. On February 27, 1869, John became the first African American to speak before the entire house, in support of claiming his seat. Despite his appeal, the House remained deadlocked, and the seat went unfilled until the next general election.



**John and his family on the 1880 Census.**

Following this defeat, John next moved to Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871, where he continued as a newspaper editor and politician. He served in the Florida legislature, was elected justice of the peace, and received appointments as deputy collector of internal revenue and customs inspector. In 1874, John once again attempted to run for U.S. Congress, but was forced to drop out of the race due to intimidation and political mudslinging.

Throughout his political career, John maintained a reputation as an eloquent and thoughtful speaker. John used his talents not only to support his own business interests and ambitions, but also to support those of all African Americans. In one lecture to a Washington audience in 1878, John used census figures to disprove racist predictions about the future of the black population in the US. W.E.B DuBois, who worked with the Census Bureau on the 1900 Census and greatly influenced the civil rights movement in the 20th century, would make the same observations several decades later.



John addressing Congress, making the argument to claim his seat.  
Library of Congress.

**Menard Finds a Place in the Census Bureau.**  
WASHINGTON, Sept. 9. — [Special.] — J. Willis Menard, who once hailed from Louisiana, but who has recently resided in Florida where he edited a newspaper, has been appointed to a position in the census bureau. He was the first colored candidate for congress in Louisiana, and was defeated by an ex-federal soldier and Democrat—Colonel Jas. Mann, in 1868.

*The Times-Picayune (New Orleans, LA) September 10, 1889.*

By 1880, John's family had relocated to Washington, D.C., where he worked as a clerk in the Treasury Department. John maintained his business concerns in Florida, continuing to buy and edit newspapers, and only permanently returned to Washington in September 1889, when he received an appointment to work on the 1890 Census. Despite his political connections, John still had to pass the civil service exam to ensure that political patronage did not harm the quality of the census work.

One great contribution to the compilation of statistics for the 1890 Census was the introduction of Herman Hollerith's tabulation machine, one of the first proto-computers. Hollerith's machine required information from the census questionnaires to be transferred to a card, which was hole-punched at various places to indicate the characteristics of each person enumerated. The cards were then run through an electronic tabulating machine, which, using metal pins to complete circuits through the punched holes, counted or cross-tabulated different characteristics. Additionally, the 1890 Census represented one of the most in-depths attempts to provide statistics on the United States up to that point, and the final report encompassed 25 volumes, covering population, agriculture, manufactures, vital and social statistics, transportation and several other subjects. Even with the advances of Hollerith's machine, the results were not completed until July 1, 1897.

Unfortunately, John did not live to see his final work completed. After returning to Washington, starting another newspaper, and working as a census clerk for four years, John passed away on October 8, 1893, after a lifetime of public service. We are grateful to John for his extensive service to the U.S. Census Bureau and our country.

**DEATH OF J. W. MENARD**  
Hon. J. Willis Menard died Sunday evening last at his residence 11526 eleventh street, and his funeral took place Wednesday at the 15th street Presbyterian church. Mr. Menard was born April 3, 1838, at Kaskaskia, Ill., was hospital steward at Washington in 1863 was elected to the Fortieth Congress from Louisiana, but through some technicality was not allowed to take his seat; and member of the Florida legislature in 1872; was clerk in Census office at time of death. He leaves a widow, a son, and two daughters.

*The Washington Bee (Washington, DC) October 14, 1893.*