

## ***George Bell***

George Waltham Bell was a graduate of Pennsylvania's Lincoln University and became presenting professor of physiology and rhetoric at Southland College near Helena, Arkansas, in 1883. Bell served on the Credentials Committee of the Arkansas Republican State Convention in 1890. That same year, Bell was nominated for the Arkansas State Senate from Desha and Chicot counties and won, becoming the only black in the Senate at the time.

In February 1891, State Sen. John N. Tillman of Fayetteville introduced legislation to bar blacks and whites from occupying the same railroad coaches. The Separate Coach Bill was the first piece of "Jim Crow" legislation passed in Arkansas. Bell, in an eloquent speech, opposed the legislation saying, "We hold that to single us out as objects worthy of scorn and derision, because our skins are black, is an injustice as odious, and as malignant and cruel as the grave! Are we yet slaves and therefore deemed unworthy to travel on the public highways in common with freemen?"

The bill passed the Senate, despite Bell's speech and dissenting. Following passage of the Separate Coach Bill, the Arkansas General Assembly debated a bill to restrict the numbers of eligible black voters. Again, Bell voiced his opposition in an eloquently constructed speech. He, along with the eleven black representatives, feared that the passage of the election bill would further reduce the number of black legislators in the state House of Representatives and the state Senate. Their fears materialized in 1893. Only three blacks were elected to the general assembly.