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The NAACP Is Born

The *Broadax*



The black press appears not to have anticipated the NAACP would emerge as the nation's largest and most enduring civil rights organization. The initial meeting on May 30, 1909, of the National Conference on the Status of the American Negro, renamed a year later the NAACP, received indifferent or skeptical treatment in half of the black newspapers whose copies survive. The historic gathering in New York was overshadowed by two other meetings in the same city, of the Tuskegee Negro Conference and the National American Negro Political League, and by President William Howard Taft's commencement address at Howard University in Washington.

*Of six African-American newspapers in circulation in 1909 that have been preserved, three published nothing at all about the National Negro Conference in the first month after its founding. The other three weeklies did put the news on the front page, but only one, the *Broadax* of Chicago, took the meeting seriously. The *Washington Bee* in its June 5 issue ran three paragraphs on the lower half of its front page about a scientific presentation made at the conference. The *New York Age*, owned by Booker T. Washington,*

philosophical rival of NAACP cofounder W. E. B. DuBois, dismissed the meeting in two cynical, opinionated articles published on June 10. The lead article on the front page carried a headline that condemned the meeting on procedural grounds: "Conference Confusion...Points of Order without Points and Arguments without Argument." The other on page 5 predicted nothing much could come of such an organization. "It is a safe hazard to state that three-fourths of the colored people attending this meeting have never succeeded in any line of occupation. It is impossible for such to become leaders and guides for ten millions of people."

Straightforward, comprehensive coverage was found only in the Broadax, which presented the news as its top story on June 12. The paper's unusual name served as a metaphor for its professed journalistic independence, as stated directly in its motto: "Hew to the line; Let the chips fall where they may." Editor and publisher Julius F. Taylor had launched the weekly in 1895 in Salt Lake City before moving his family and enterprise to Chicago four years later. In an era when most African Americans were Republicans, Taylor was four decades ahead of his time as a proud Democrat who believed the Republican Party had abandoned black people after Emancipation.

The headline on the Broadax article about the founding meeting accurately foreshadowed the NAACP's future as a national organization "contending for the civil and political rights of th[e] Afro-American." The basic facts of the meeting were covered in three summary paragraphs, followed by texts of what the paper deemed the three "most notable" speeches. The first explained the mission and purpose of the organization, while the second placed the country's racial situation in an historical context. The last was a well-argued address by DuBois, who rebutted Washington's controversial position that African Americans could advance economically without political rights. The 2,700-word article without a byline is republished with its original typographical errors, which were common in newspapers in that era of lead type set by hand.

The National Conference on the Status of the American Negro

FINISHED ITS SESSIONS IN NEW YORK CITY.

JUDGE WENDELL PHILLIPS STAFFORD OF THE SUPREME COURT
OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

PROF. WILLIAM E.B. DU BOIS OF ATLANTA, GA., DELIVERED THE
MOST NOTABLE ADDRESSES OF THE OCCASION.

PROF. JOHN SPENCER BASSET DECLARES THAT THOMAS JEFFERSON
WAS THE FIRST PRESIDENT, TO APPOINT A NEGRO TO AN OFFICE.

THAT ANDREW JACKSON WAS THE FRIST PRESIDENT TO
ENTERTAIN COLORED PEOPLE AT THE WHITE HOUSE.

PERMANENT ORGANIZATION TO BE MAINTAINED THROUGHTOUT
THE UNION FOR THE PURPOSE OF CONTENDING FOR THE CIVIL
AND POLITICAL RIGHTS OF TH AFRO-AMERICAN.

The first session of the National Conference on the Status of the American Negro, was held in New York City last week. Its session were [*sic*] held in the Charities Building 105 E. 22^d street in Cooper Union.

Each meeting was addressed by some of the most prominent men and women of both races. Among them being Bishop Alexander Walters, John E. Milholland, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, Charles Edward Russell, Mrs. Ida Wells Barnett, Chicago, Joseph C. Manning, editor The Southern American, Alexander City, Ala. Albert E. Pillsbury [*sic*], ex-Attorney-General of Massachusetts; Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Chicago, Prof. John Spencer Bassett of Smith College Northampton, Mass., Rev. J O Milton Waldron, Washington, D.C.; Mrs. Celia Parker Wooley, Chicago; Dr. Livingston Farrand, New York City; Prof. W. E. B. Du Bois, Atlanta, Ga, and Judge Wendell Vhillips [*sic*] Stafford of the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, and O.G. Vilar, [*sic*] editor the Post, New York City.

The Addresses of Prof. Du Bois, Judge Stafford, and Prof. Bassett, were the most notable of all the addresses delivered and which are re-produced in full.

Judge Stafford declared:

“I believe in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. Not the brotherhood of white men, but the brotherhood of all men. I believe in the golden rule and the Declaration of Independence, and I stand by the Constitution of the United States, including the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. That is my creed and my platform.

“The broad subject of our conference is the Negro and the nation, not the Negro and the North, not the Negro and the South, not the Negro and the white man, but the Negro and the nation. The questions it brings up are national. They cannot be settled by one race and still less by any one... They concern the whole country and the must be answered by the country as a whole. If the Constitution is not binding in South Carolina, it is not binding in New York. If it cannot protect the black man it cannot long protect the white.

“If fifteen States can set aside the Constitution at their pleasure there is no Constitution worth the name. If a State can nullify one clause it can nullify the whole. If a State can, in a single Congressional district, deliberately exclude three-fourths of its eligible voters, and yet insist upon having them all counted for the purpose of holding a seat in the national assembly, it can perpetrate [*sic*] a fraud on every legally constituted Congressional district in the United States, and there is no security for representative government in any corner of the land.

“If any class or race can be permanently set apart from and pushed down below the rest in political and civil rights, so may any other class or race when it shall incur the displeasure of its more powerful associates, and we may say farewell at once to the principles which we have counted for protection.

“We are confronted, not by a theory, but by a fact. That fact is the deliberate and avowed exclusion of a whole race of our fellow-citizens from their constitutional rights, accompanied by the announcement that that exclusion must and shall be permanent. It is not that the Negro is ignorant, nor that he is poor, nor that he is vicious, but that he is a Negro. Even when he is good and learned and rich, he must still be excluded because he is still a Negro. That is the proposition, and that it is which makes it the duty of all who dissent from such a doctrine to make their dissent known and make it uncompromising and clear.

Problems Faced Squarely.

“It will not do to shut our eyes to the real causes and result of the war—especially now when Northern indifference and Southern injustice strike hands to keep the black race in a new bondage as helpless and hopeless as the old. As a member of the white race and turning for the moment to white men. I say that our race will deserve any calamity the presence of the black race may bring. We brought it here by theft and force. We owed it liberty and we gave it a chain. We owe it light and we gave it darkness. We owe it opportunity and we hedge it around certain restraints. We owe it the court-house and we give it the lynching tree.

“Shame on the race that holds in its hands the wealth of the continent and carries in its brain the accumulated culture of the centuries, and yet refusing to lift ignorance and vice to the level of enlightenment and virtue, makes that ignorance and vice an excuse for the denial of rights. Never until the white man has spent his last surplus dollar and exhausted the last faculty of his brain in the effort to lift up his weaker brother—never until then can he stand in the presence of infinite justice and complain of the ignorance or the criminality of the black.

“America did not choose the great doctrine of equal rights—that immortal truth chose America. It has moulded [*sic*] her form [*sic*] the beginning; it will mould [*sic*] her until the end; but, if it cannot it will cast her off with the wreckage of the past and take up some other nation that shall be found worthy.”

Treatment by Whites

Professor Bassett, speaking of the history of the Negro in America and his treatment by the whites, said:

“There is such a thing as the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward inferiors. By observing the feeling on the subject in the places in which the English stock has ruled inferiors, we may have general features of this Anglo-Saxon attitude.

“Mr. Bryce gives us some good illustrations of the feeling in Cape Colony [part of modern South Africa]. For example, a gentleman there may invite an educated Negro to dinner, but before doing so he will ask his white guests if they object to such company. Nor does it happen that he loses position in society because he has been host to a native. He is eligible thereafter as a guest himself at the home of those who would not accept his invitation under the conditions specified. The same is true as to intermarriage. It occurs rarely and there is no law against it. Sometimes a poor white man [*sic*] will work for a Negro who has employment for him.

“Social relations with Negroes are not desired by the majority of the whites, but those who oppose such relations do not think the safety of society demands that the advocates of other views be held as enemies of the

public good. On this subject people seem to think that the best safety of the public lies in allowing a man to believe as he chooses without making him pay any penalty.

“When the nineteenth century began, for three decades thereafter, the whites had the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward the Negro. They ought to develop him, they recognized his inferiority in the mass while they encouraged all efforts in the individual which seemed to work for his uplift.

“The position of the Southern churches at this time has its parallel in that some of the leading public men, Washington and many prominent Virginians are well known for their mild views of the Negro. In 1791, Thomas Jefferson, secretary of state, appointed Negro mathematician [*sic*] to office in his department because he wanted to see if a Negro [Benjamin Banneker] would succeed in that capacity. His letter to a gentleman in France telling of the matter shows that he did not disapprove of Negro officeholders.

Received by Andrew Jackson

“And it was under Andrew Jackson, the second founder of the Democratic Party, that Negroes, so far as I can learn, were first received at a social function in the White House.

“Now these incidents do not prove everything, but they show that public opinion in 1791 and in 1829 was not like public opinion in the South at present. All that I claim is that in the first three decades of the nineteenth century the Southern whites had the typical English attitude toward the Negro. They recognized his inferiority, they sought to secure his development, and that painfully solid opinion which demands that white hands shall never touch black ones had not come into existence.

“Then came the war, with its failures and reconstruction, with its fury. Whether we condemn or approve Negro suffrage which the North forced on the South while it could, we shall see that it did not improve [*sic*] the South’s opinion of the Negro. From 1830 to 1909 is a long period. There is not a man living in the South today who remembers the time when the Negro question was not associated with passion. The people

there not only have forgotten that they ever planned and strove to develop the race in the old English way, but they have difficulty to believe the historian when he proves it from their own history. They have not thought it possible to return to the former attitude, and yet what has been done can be done again.

“If we could return to the attitude which existed in the days of saner conditions, the days of Jefferson and Washington, we should not have social intermingling of the races. The difference between that condition and the present would be in the absence of friction. A white man would not hate a Negro because he was a Negro and a black man would not hate a white man because he was white. We should then lose that apprehension as old as slavery that some day there will come a great struggle between the two hostile races, a struggle whose great probability lies in the habitual anticipation of it.”

Two Mischievous Propositions

Prof. Du Bois said in part:

“The phrase take the Negro out of politics has come to be regarded as synonymous with industrial training and property getting by black men. I want to show that in my opinion these propositions are wrong and mischievous.

“We believe in vocational training but we also believe that the vocation of a man in a modern civilized [*sic*] land includes not only the technique of his actual work, but intelligent comprehension of his elementary duties as a father, citizen, and maker of public opinion, as possible voter, a conserver of the public health, an intelligent follower of moral customs, and one who can at least appreciate if not partake, something of the higher spiritual life of the world.

“It is possible—easily possible to train a working class who shall have no right to participate in the government. Most of the manual workers in the history of the world have been so trained. But the one thing that is impossible and proven so again and again is to train two sets of workers side by side in economic competition and one set of set voters and deprive the set of all participation in government. It invites a conflict and

oppression. A nation cannot exist half slave and half free. Either the slave will rise through blood or the freeman will sink. So far tremendous effort in the South has been put forth to keep down economic competition between the races, by confining the Negroes by law and custom to certain vocations. But this effort is bound to break down.

“Moreover, the school [*sic*] that increase the competition are the industrial schools, and this is both natural and proper. This competition accentuates race prejudice; when a whole community, a whole nation, pours contempt on a fellow man, it seems a personal insult for that man to work beside me or at the same kind of work.

“Not only is there this feeling, but there is also power to act. After the Atlanta riot the police and militia searched the houses of Colored people and took away guns and ammunition while the sheriff almost gave away guns to some of the very men who had composed the mob. We think this monstrous, but this is but a parallel of the action of the whole nation; they have put the ballot in the hands of the white workingmen of the South and taken it away from the black fellow workingmen.

“Other things being equal, the employer is forced to discharge the black man and hire the white man—white opinion demands it, the administrators of government, including police magistrates, etc., render it, easier, since by preferring the white, many intricate questions of social contact are avoided and political influence is vastly increased.

Must Work for Less Wages

“Under such circumstances there is nothing for the Negro to do but to bribe the employer by underbidding his white fellow; to work not only for less money wages, but for longer hours and under worse conditions.

“Does he want to do this. Does he like long hours and under worse conditions.

“Does he want to do this. Does he like longer hours. Ignorant as he is as a mass, has he not intelligence enough to perceive the value of labor unions and the meaning of the labor movement? No, it is not because the black man is a fool, but because he is a victim that he drags labor down.

“Judges and juries in the South are at the absolute mercy of the white voters. Few ordinary judges would dare to oppose the momentary whim of the white mob, and practically only now and then will a jury convict a white man for aggression a Negro. Not only is this true in criminal but also in civil suits, so much so that it is a widespread custom among negroes of property never to take a civil suite [sic] to court but to let the white complainant settle it. In all public benefits like schools and parks and gathering and institutions, Negroes are regularly taxed for what they cannot enjoy. I am taxed for the Carnegie Public Library of Atlanta where I cannot enter to draw my own books. Negroes of Memphis are taxed for public parks where they cannot sit down.

Barred From Engines and Autos

“Witness the strike of the white locomotive firemen in Georgia today; Negro firemen get from fifty cents to one dollar a day less than the white firemen, have to do menial work and cannot become engineers. They can, however, by good service and behavior, be promoted to the best runs by the rule of seniority. Even this the white firemen now object to, and say in a manifesto; the “white people of this State refuse to accept Negro...This is worse than that. The other day the white automobile drivers of Atlanta made a frantic appeal in the papers for persons to stop hiring black drivers. The black drivers replied. “We have had fewer accidents than you and get less wages.” But he [sic] whites simply said, “this ought to be a white man’s job.”

“The voteless Negro is a provocation, an invitation, to oppression, a plaything for mobs, and a bonanza for demagogues. They serve always to distract attention from real issues and to ride fools and rascal [sic] into political power. The political campaign in Georgia before the last was avowedly and openly a campaign, not against Negro crime and ignorance, but against Negro intelligence and property owning and industrial competition, as shown by an 83 per cent increase in their property in ten years. It swept the State and if it had not culminated in riot and bloodshed and thus scared capital, it would still be triumphant. As it is, the end is not yet.

“Fourteen years ago Mississippi began disfranchising Negroes. You were promised that the result would be to settle the Negro problem. Is it settled? No, and it never will be until you give black men power to be men, until you give them power to defend that manhood. When the Negro cast a free and intelligent vote in the South then, and not until then will the Negro problem be settled.”