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Elective Franchise

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tion which registered 43,404 in 1870, a gain of 29,108 or more than two hundred per cent in one decade.²²

I

ELECTIVE FRANCHISE

Following the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia the question of manhood suffrage became the great issue. Since they had secured their social freedom, the political freedom was attempted with less misgivings and a greater concerted effort. Public sentiment was brought into play as heretofore and newspapers almost instantly popularized the subject. The National Republican was one of the first to carry an editorial advocating the passage of the suffrage bill on the ground of meritorious service rendered by the group it sought to promote. The following account appeared in a June issue of this daily: "In view of the position assumed by the Republicans yesterday on the suffrage question, we refer with pleasure to the excellent resolutions published elsewhere which were unanimously adopted at the Great Johnson Meeting held at Cooper Institute Wednesday evening. It was right to the point. A man who is fit to fight for the Government ought to be fit to vote under it."²³

In the following month a mammoth mass meeting was held in Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church located at 11th and K Streets. This meeting had for its purpose the drafting of a memorial to be presented to Congress asking that the rights of suffrage be extended to the colored constituency of the District of Columbia. This meeting paved the way for others which immediately placed themselves on record with similar petitions.²⁴

In all these attempts and adventures on the part of the colored people, they were guided by the sane and statesmen-like counsel of many white friends who assumed the role of legal advisers. Mr. James Fishback was one of the first, after the plan was on foot, to suggest means which might secure the desired end. He proposed, since it was estimated that there were not less than 2,000 colored men in the District of Columbia who could read and write, that the influence of these men should be brought to bear in a tangible way. It was pointed out that the most prominent objection that would be urged against allowing Negroes to vote was that they were not sufficiently educated to exercise the sacred duty of the office.

²² Bureau of Census: Negro Population of U. S., 1790-1915, pp. 57, 218.

²³ The National Republican, June 9, 1865.

²⁴ The National Intelligencer, July 28, 1865.

To meet such objections as indicated he advised the colored people to prepare and place into the hands of Senator Sumner or some other equally true and tried friend a petition signed by every colored man in the District asking that the right of suffrage be granted them. "See that every man who signs the petition does so with his own hand, then when your petition is presented to Congress the attention of that body can be called to the fact that notwithstanding all the disadvantages there are 2,000 of your number in the District who can read and write. No argument more profound and convincing can or need be presented to Congress in favor of extending to you the franchise."²⁵

At the opening of the following Congress, December 4, 1865, to which the quotation above refers, there was a long and heated debate between the advocates and the opposition relative to the rights of the colored people to the ballot. This discussion was precipitated by a bill which was introduced asking Congress to fix the legal status of the Negroes in the District of Columbia. The bill was presented by Benjamin Wade of Ohio, a strong champion of rights. On December 6, the bill was referred to the Committee on the District of Columbia and on January 10, 1866 it was reintroduced in the Committee of the Whole. It was amended by the Committee so as to grant the elective franchise to "every male person without distinction of race, who was 21 years of age and had not been convicted of crime and was not a pauper under guardianship and was able to read the Constitution in English and write his name. Those who disturb the lawful elector in the exercise of the franchise were, at the discretion of the Court, to be fined not over \$1,000 or imprisoned and fed on bread and water for not over thirty days, or suffer both penalties."²⁶

Several objections were made to the bill in this form. First, the clause, "have not been convicted of crime," was a serious handicap to the colored people, for, as pointed out by their friends, many of them had been thrown into prison for the most trivial offences while others would be held on the slightest pretext to answer for charges falsely alleged. Thus the majority of the people for whom the privilege of suffrage was asked would be deprived of the right.

It was readily observed also that the educational qualification would exclude the majority of the colored people as well as quite a large number of intelligent foreigners who could not speak or write the English language. To remedy this there were many proposals made. Some advocated eliminating the educational requirement altogether. Among

²⁵ The National Republican, September 16, 1865.

²⁶ The Great Debates in American History, Vol. 8, p. 9. The Washington Evening Star, January 10, 1866.

those holding this view was Mr. Samuel Pomeroy of Kansas who stated that to make voting conditioned on the ability to read and write would be to add insult to injury. He brought out and stressed in his argument that it would be unfair to impose such restrictions upon the colored people without first giving them an educational opportunity. All the amendments proposed were accepted save this one which caused the bill to be delayed for a few days. On the 16th of January the bill was again reported out and placed on the calendar. This time the opposition was led by Garritte Davis of Kentucky who claimed that the educational test was not even rigid enough to safeguard the interest of the District. He gave the following reasons for his views: "In a short time every Negro shall be able to spell through the Constitution to the satisfaction of partial judges of elections."²⁷

Others contended that even though the colored people were entitled to the right of suffrage it could be conferred at the expense of the welfare of the District. Should this be done a population of 125,000 would become victims of unwise legislation brought on by inexperienced law-makers.

The advocates at this stage favored a compromise by which a reasonable restriction could be imposed, at the same time, not to the detriment of the Negro population. Then the crux of the whole suffrage movement came to light. This was the time honored objection of the opponents who feared that the Negroes would be brought into contact with white women and their daughters at the polls. Senator Davis refuted this stock argument in the following words: "I have never heard of an instance where the white man was shocked by being brought into contact with the Negroes at the election polls."²⁸ He further told of the very pleasant experience he had in his own State with the colored people who justly vindicated the wisdom of being granted the elective franchise, citing many instances where the Negroes had successfully gone through with the experiment.

There seemed to have existed a general suspicion that the bill for regulating suffrage in the District was an ambiguous document and contained implied powers which could be interpreted to mean not only the right to vote but also to hold offices on basis of equality with the white man. This apprehension formed the chief source of agitation for the enemies who were casting about for plausible grounds upon which to base their contentions. Following in the wake of this new interpretation Mr. Bingaman requested that the bill be re-read for the

²⁷ The Great Debates in American History, Vol. 8.

²⁸ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st Session. Vol. 71, pp. 215-216.

benefit of the House, and also asked that the article by Mr. Rogers of New Jersey be read. The said editorial appeared in one of the dailies and was his version of the suffrage bill in both its written and implied powers. For the benefit of giving his views on the latter, the following section was read as requested: "This bill goes further than was even intended by any State where legislation has been had on the subject. If this bill passes it will allow the Negroes not only to have the right to vote but to become Judges of the Courts, Mayors of the City and to hold the highest offices in the gift of the qualified voters in the District."²⁹ That this was the effect of the bill as proposed, he challenged any one to deny. "Such a cause," says he, "will disgrace and degrade us before the nations of the earth. Shall this fair Temple which has been reared by the genius and wisdom of our fathers, be despoiled and the city built in the name of Washington be so far insulted that a black man shall be Mayor of the city or sit as Judge in the Capital of the United States, that a Negro shall preside over the rights and liberties of white men and women of the District?"³⁰

Mr. Kelly of Pennsylvania who introduced the bill in Congress was asked to state its purpose for the benefit of those who desired to speak on same. He stated that the purpose of the bill as he understood it was to invest all the citizens of the District of Columbia with the right of citizenship, and that he had not anticipated anything beyond the right of suffrage.

Mr. Kelly asked permission to express his desire rather than his opinion relative to the whole matter, but his request was not granted. However, during the period of discussion he succeeded in giving out a statement which showed the trend of his views. It ran as follows: "If it should be found at the next election or at any subsequent election that there is in the District a black man so eminently superior to all the white men as that, in the face of the prejudices that now curse the race, the white men should believe that he should make the best Mayor or Alderman or Supervisor that they could find, they should have the right to his pre-eminent service."³¹ Following this interpretation it was decided that the bill be revised so as to confine its meaning to suffrage only.

While the bill was passing through the argumentative stage in Congress the daily papers kept the issue in the lime light of public opinion, a matter which looked to some as an ultra measure while to others, a very conservative one. The Daily Morning Chronicle held

²⁹ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st Session. Vol. 71, p. 235.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st Session. Vol. 71, p. 235.

that the determination of Congress to complete the work of emancipation in the District by passing this suffrage bill had greatly increased the hostility of the pro-slavery faction which was not only ready to fight the battle with ideas but equally willing to renew the most wicked scenes of the Rebellion. The editorial condoned the fact that first attempt made by Congress to exercise exclusive jurisdiction in the interest of liberty, after the overthrow of human slavery, was met not simply with objections or the force of a vote at the polls but with long drawn out threats of bloody resistance, even unto death.³²

The principle of manhood suffrage was heartily championed by an editorial which appeared in the *National Intelligencer*. This comment followed the trend of the former in lamenting the conditions that obtained in reference to the rights and privileges recognized by the fathers to be the sacred heritage of all men irrespective of color or creed. This was made more emphatic by quoting a petition signed by 1,000 men praying Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia 37 years prior to that date. The quotation was as follows: "The existence among us of a distinct class of people, who by their condition as slaves are deprived of almost every incentive to virtue and industry and shut out from many of the sources of light and knowledge has an evident tendency to corrupt the morals of the people and to dampen the spirit of enterprise. That this disastrous flow from slavery is sufficiently conspicuous when we contrast the conditions of the District of Columbia with the surrounding country, with the prosperity of those parts of the Union which are less favored in point of climate and location but blessed with a free population."³³

The above petition was referred to with the hope that those who counted it a patriotic duty to revere the judgment of the "Fathers" would exert their political influence to consummate the work which they had so nobly begun.

That the colored people were capable of intelligently wielding the power of the ballot to the best interest of the public, and that they had ability to pass judgment upon questions of far reaching consequences, are seen in a resolution presented to Congress, asking that the status of manhood suffrage among the white in the District of Columbia be determined by a solid Negro vote. The resolution was presented by one Mr. Broomall and read as follows: "Whereas all just government derives its power from the consent of the governed and whereas the best mode of obtaining that consent is by means of the ballot box,

³² The Daily Morning Chronicle, January 9, 1866.

³³ *Ibid.*

and whereas the white men of the District of Columbia have recently decided by that means, that in their opinion the black man should not be allowed the right of suffrage: Therefore, resolved that the Committee for the District of Columbia be instructed to inquire into the expediency of ordering an election at which time the black man of the District shall decide by ballot whether or not in their opinion, the white man should be allowed the right of suffrage.”³⁴

This resolution passed the Senate with a majority of 128 votes, but there appears no record of its having become effective. This measure precipitated a spirited discussion, for the enemies readily perceived that the bill as worded not only recognized the rights of the colored people to citizenship but went a step further by placing a premium upon his judgment in the exercise of those rights. This was an index to the thoughts of the better class of white people relative to the ability of the Negro.

It was revealed that many who opposed granting the elective franchise to the colored inhabitants of the District had made convincing speeches in favor of conceding the same to some of the Southern States. This inconsistency could only be accounted for on the grounds of prejudice, which greatly weakened the arguments coming from that side.

The New York Evening Post being quoted by the Chronicle affirmed the statement made in the above reference. It spoke in the following language: “We hear from Washington that a few Republican members of Congress are busying themselves with a movement to stave off, that is to say, to deny the suffrage to the colored people of the District of Columbia. We are surprised to learn that among the leaders in this movement are many who do not hesitate to demand suffrage for Negroes in the Southern States.”³⁵ The editorial also asserted that it would be extremely difficult to harmonize the views of such advocates and to justify their demands, since they deny the vote to the colored people in the District of Columbia who were by far superior to those in the South, and who constituted a group of the most wealthy, intelligent and law abiding citizens of the District and race.

Congress was entreated to ignore the appeal and when it reconvened to establish that equality of suffrage in the District of Columbia which the opposition demanded for the Southern States. The apparent fallacy in the argument made by those who wished to defeat the bill heightened the probability of securing favorable legislation. Since public sentiment constitutes a determining factor in matters vital

³⁴ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st Session. Vol. 71, p. 233.

³⁵ The Daily Morning Chronicle, November 17, 1866.

to social groups, the Mayor of the city of Washington was called upon to put the question of Negro suffrage upon its merits by submitting it to a direct vote of the people. The Mayor addressed himself to the task. The result transmitted to Congress and in the report the Mayor stated that the election was held December 21, 1865, at which time the vote stood 6,591 in the negative to 35 in the affirmative.

Thus with a majority of 6,556, the reporter stated that the unanimity of public opinion made it highly inexpedient to force upon them equality of suffrage by Congressional coercion. He emphasized that no other persons save the 35 reported could be found in the community who favored the elective franchise for Negroes. Previous records were consulted and it was ascertained that more votes were polled against the bill in the last election than ever before, save once. This was used as an argument to prove that there was a growing sentiment against the idea of conferring upon the Negro full citizenship rights.

The report also inferred that even those who registered their vote in the affirmative were persons seeking some political remuneration through bribery or otherwise, and not persons in whom the public might confide for sane leadership. The following is a specimen of that document: "This unanimity of sentiment engenders an earnest hope that Congress will abstain from the exercise of its absolute power and so avert an impending future objectionable to those over whom, by the fundamental law of the land, they have exclusive jurisdiction. With much respect, I am, sir, your own and the Senate's obedient servant, Richard Walloch, Mayor."³⁶

While the destiny of the bill remained problematical the colored people in the District of Columbia assumed no passive attitude to their interests involved in the suffrage movement. Their aggressive spirit was demonstrated by several of the civic organizations which functioned to arouse the colored population to action. Among the more influential ones was the Colored Sailors and Soldiers League, which sent down an urgent call to all the colored citizens in the District of Columbia, to join them in a public mass meeting. The object of the meeting was to place the suffrage issue clearly before the people that they might be inspired to make a concerted effort in interest of their own group, and to establish a precedent for their race at large. They adopted as a slogan the following historical saying: "We know our rights, and knowing, we dare to maintain them."³⁷ The call was made also to all political organizations and clubs representing other activities among

³⁶ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st Session. Vol. 71, p. 113.

³⁷ The Daily Morning Chronicle, November 10, 1866.

the colored citizens. These were instructed to report to Mr. G. W. Arnold, 325 Eye Street.

Mr. Chandler, who was the leader of the opposition in the House of Representatives, made a very profound speech to that body, setting forth his objections to giving the Negro so prominent a place in the political life of the dominating race, especially in the National Capital. He based his contention on constitutional grounds alleging that even though Congress had absolute power over the District of Columbia, he questioned the right of Congress to exercise this in behalf of Negroes who were not, according to the Constitution, even citizens of America much less citizens of the District of Columbia. He called their attention to the preamble of Constitution and stated that if the principle of Negro suffrage be established the term, "the people" in the preamble would be interpreted to mean the Negroes, who, he said, were not in the minds of the framers of the Constitution. To make this departure from the lofty ideals of the fathers was the forecast of a national evil.

Quoting from this document Article I, Sections 8, 9, which deal with the naturalization and emigration laws, he affirmed that these sections plainly fixed the intent of the framers of the Constitution on certain definite points, viz, the existence of three races: First, the framers of the Constitution; secondly, the Indian race and third, the slave race or the Negro race. From this he drew the following conclusions: The dominating race was the framers of the Constitution and the seat of government and dominion was to be under the control of this race. The migrant race was homogeneous with the former or white race, the only point of difference was the time in which they migrated from Europe. This left only the Negro race which was classed as property.

Thus it was evident that the only reference made to the Negro in the preamble was that which classified him as chattel, and to elevate him to the citizenship of the United States would be to violate the spirit of the preamble to the Constitution which made the United States a nation. Coming to his conclusion he said, "The Negro should never be allowed to vote in the District until the majority of the whole people of the Union shall have passed their judgment upon his fitness to hold so great a power at the seat of Government."³⁸

The Daily Morning Chronicle called attention to the fact that all great reforms carried with them supreme sacrifices and the spirit of unrest which were the evidences of a worthy cause. It referred to the

³⁸ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st Session. Vol. 71, pp. 220-221.

passing of slavery in the District of Columbia which created quite an excitement among those who grew exasperated over the idea of advancing those who had been held so long as slaves to the social level of their masters, but all turmoil subsided when the Negro proved his ability to hold his own in the newly acquired position. The current belief was that his past experience in that struggle fitted him to appreciate better the power of the franchise. The recruiting of a black regiment, it was said, created quite a sensation in the city of Washington, but when they marched across the river to meet the enemy the wisdom of their military promotion was more than vindicated. The comment closed with the following suggestion: "Make the experiment first with the District of Columbia for even the far away slaves States now advocate conferring modified suffrage upon their unnumbered multitude of colored citizens, and should it come first in the District of Columbia, nobody will die of it, the sun will shine, the stars will twinkle and the great world will move on just the same as ever."³⁹

At this stage of the bill every conceivable argument, both pro and con had been resorted to; thus it had reached that psychological point where Congress was called upon to determine its future. This final step was taken December 13, 1866, when the Senate passed the bill with a majority of 19 votes.⁴⁰ "In passing the bill," says a daily, "the Senate has responded to the wishes of a great majority of the loyal people of the country and at the same time removed from the Capital of the Republic the last vestige of the foul crime of slavery."⁴¹

Even though the president had not signed the bill, it was predicted that since public opinion had sanctioned this act of Congress it was virtually a law. When it reached the President it received his "qualified veto," based on the following grounds: First, that the Negro was disqualified from an educational standpoint and it would be injurious to the District of Columbia to place the ballot into the hands of an unintelligent element. Secondly, that the influx of Negroes to the District of Columbia would result in overpopulation, thereby creating a serious labor problem for both races. In the third place, the Negro votes would be bought up by cheap politicians for selfish purposes. Along with this increase of power went the increase of responsibility, for upon the successful operation of suffrage in the District of Columbia depended, to a great degree, its adoption elsewhere.

Shortly after the President returned the bill to Congress bearing his disapproval the following striking notice appeared in one of the papers:

³⁹ The Daily Morning Chronicle, January 6, 1866.

⁴⁰ Ibid. December 14, 1866.

⁴¹ Ibid.

"The veto vetoed." This was an announcement that Congress had passed the bill over the President's protest thus conferring upon over 30,000 Negroes the balance of power in the municipal affairs of the District.

Commenting upon the President's veto the Chronicle declared, "Andrew Johnson's veto reads as much like a Copperhead speech as if it had been written for him by the skillful Democratic Rhetorician, the elder Blair. There is nothing new in any of his objections. The only things really good in his veto are the old extractions from the fathers of the Constitution, as they are called. It is amusing to see how he uses the words of these dead men to scold a living Congress."⁴² This article continues to stress the fact that when the Constitution was being formulated the framers never anticipated what their successors met in this slave holders revolt. And little did they dream of the assassination of a real President to make room for what is generally called a President perfidious. Had these fearful contingencies entered among the possibilities they would have left a different remedy for our political doctors."⁴³ Among the provisions that would have been, according to the article, were the following: that all traitors, if not shot as a foe to liberty, should be forever disfranchised backed up by the Supreme Court. That a government that did not recognize the freedom of all men after having been purchased by their own blood deserved to be branded as an ingrate and impostor before the bar of public opinion.

The Washington Evening Star added a word of precaution to those who had not become reconciled to the new element coming into political power. They were urged to give the experiment of Negro suffrage a fair trial which was the only logical test to be applied. This did much to placate the hostile feeling engendered by the overwhelming defeat of the opponents and paved the way to a more friendly relation between the races.⁴⁴

As recipients of this new power, the colored people began immediately upon the function of their offices. Many accounts followed the first election in which they participated, but on the whole they were favorable. Everywhere the elections resulted in a clean sweep for the Republican Party and they were conducted with none of the violence and bloodshed predicted by the foes. The commendations poured in from every source according them a hearty welcome. The following was made in referring to the outlook: "The election was the key that unlocked millions of bosoms and expelled from them prejudices that had

⁴² The Daily Morning Chronicle, January 8, 1867.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ The Washington Evening Star, January 8, 1867.

grown chronic with years. It gave the sacred assurance to your friends that however high the standard may be set you are not afraid to march up to it.”⁴⁵

That the colored people were capable of taking on the best that was offered can be seen in the thirst for knowledge. School houses were erected on every available spot and both old and young flocked to them. Suffrage proved to be a social leaven that permeated the whole lump converting the slave into a veritable citizen. “With a solicitude I can not express, I shall watch,” says a white friend, “the progress of events not doubting that all you have promised you will fulfill.” The elections everywhere were hailed with delight and the Mayor of the city was alert to every possible outbreak of race prejudice. A general call was made for the purpose of utilizing police power, if need be, to protect the interest of Negro voters throughout the whole District.

The apprehension that prevailed terminated in one of the most orderly elections ever polled within the District. This was accomplished to the lasting credit of both races. The outcropping of racial feeling was very slight and was only observed among a few radicals who tried to deceive the new suffragists by their false placards titled, “Republican Ticket,” posted at the various polls. These were soon displaced by a similar method of announcement as follows: “Beware the Democrats have counterfeited your ticket, see that you vote for the right one.”⁴⁶

The election in Georgetown, where the enemies had spread every kind of propaganda, followed an orderly procedure along all lines and justified every step that Congress had taken in behalf of Negro suffrage. The following is the impression of the behavior exhibited at the polls: “The uncommon order that prevailed during the day, notwithstanding the deep and prevailing excitement created by the fact that the colored would for the first time exercise the highest franchise of citizenship, was creditable to all parties.”⁴⁷

The success attained in the District was a death blow to the trite arguments on the superiority of races based upon the color of the skin, for the achievements of the Negro had kept pace with his opportunities and in proportion to superior advantages enjoyed by him in the same proportion had he become superior. The Negroes were identified with all civic reforms inaugurated in the District of Columbia. To show their gratitude to Congress for the laudable stand it took in behalf of the suffrage movement, the colored citizens staged a Suffrage Jubilee Meeting, which was held in John Wesley Church on Connecticut Ave-

⁴⁵ The Daily Morning Chronicle, April 23, 1867.

⁴⁶ The Washington Evening Star, June 3, 1867.

⁴⁷ The Daily Morning Chronicle, February 26, 1867.

nue. Leading men of the race participated in this meeting and among them were Professor Williams of Howard University and Mr. Day of New York. The principal address was delivered by Rev. J. M. Loguen of New York, familiarly known as the "King of the Underground Railroad."⁴⁸ Fitting resolutions were adopted extending thanks to the friends who gave themselves unreservedly to the great issue of human rights.

Not only did the District rejoice in this triumph of right against wrong but distant places felt the wholesome influence and joined in extending felicitations to the citizens of the District of Columbia. Mr. Beamen introduced into Congress a resolution from the State Legislature of Michigan, approving the action of Congress in passing the bill over the President's veto. This resolution was ordered by Congress to be printed.⁴⁹

With the passage of this important piece of legislation, the colored people of the District of Columbia made another distinct advance toward true citizenship.

II

EDUCATION

The earliest educational advantages offered to Negroes in the District of Columbia grew out of enterprises fostered wholly by their own group. The first school building was erected in 1807 by George Bell, Nicholas Franklin and Moses Liverpool. Franklin and Liverpool were slaves who came from Virginia and were caulkers by trade. It is alleged that Franklin secured his freedom through religious confession. Bell was from Maryland and served as a slave in the home of Anthony Addison who lived a few rods beyond Eastern Branch, D. C. His wife, Sophia Browning, who was in the service of the Bell family, saved from the sale of truck the sum of \$400, with which she purchased her husband's freedom. These three men became the leading spirits in this great educational movement, despite the fact that none of them could read or write.⁵⁰

The structure was a one story frame building erected opposite and west of Providence Hospital. There were at that time 1,498 colored inhabitants residing in the District of Columbia, and of this number 1,004 were slaves and 490 constituted the free population. The second school was started by an organization known as the Resolute Beneficial

⁴⁸ The Daily Morning Chronicle, January 16, 1867.

⁴⁹ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 2nd Session. Vol. 77, p. 990.

⁵⁰ The U. S. Commissioner of Education for the D. C., 1868, p. 196.