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Social Achievements

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SOCIAL ACHIEVEMENTS

The social condition of the colored people in the District of Columbia during Reconstruction has both a bright and a dark side. The nature of the problem was the same as that which affected them in other phases of their life, viz, that of overpopulation. The solution to this social problem, however, was not so easily discovered since it involved the basic principle upon which all the others rested. At this stage of their progress there was an awakening of their social consciousness to the highest and best things they were capable of attaining unto. Social responsibility had developed a sense of need which could only be supplied through rivalry with a far superior race. Their ideas and ideals were very lofty even though they occupied a humble station in society.

There were many whites who feared that the very presence of the Negro in the District of Columbia would have a demoralizing effect upon the culture and refinement of the white citizens and that social equality would forever remain a stigma upon the fair name of the nation's Capital. Those who shared this view sought to evade the pending danger by a colonization scheme which would provide for a colored commonwealth where they could develop the power of self government. Congress was urged to appropriate funds sufficient to transport them to the unsettled sections of the West or give them a choice between Hayti and Africa as a location for permanent settlement. The motive for this action on the part of the whites was not immediately discovered by the colored people.

In the midst of this group of colored citizens there were some keenly alert to every move and assumed a critical attitude toward every inducement offered for colonization abroad. As has been stated, the Negroes were reluctant to give up the customs and habits that formed the woof and warp of their social life to try the uncertainties of a strange land. The plan to rid the District of the undesirable element did not prove to be so feasible as it appeared from the surface, for not a few interpreted this as a spirit of segregation rather than a spirit of colonization.

The attitude assumed by the whites may be better understood by an article which appeared in the National Intelligencer. The occasion of this comment was the visit of Mr. J. E. Walker of California to the city of Washington for the purpose of procuring a force of 250 laborers. This excited the interest of those who desired to free the

District of Columbia of the surplus Negro population. To quote the following is sufficient to reveal the public opinion: "Our citizens will be glad to hear that they have now an opportunity to rid the city of the burdensome, offensive and demoralizing excess of Negroes in our population. If they regard this element as a public evil now is the time for them to manifest both their sincerity and their public spirit."¹⁰⁹

In referring to the meeting which was called by the Freedmen's Bureau at Wisewell Barracks, at which time Mr. Walker was to speak, the editorial had the following to say: "Let every white person, whether as a means of ridding the community of the pest or from higher motives of humanity, make it a point today, tomorrow, and daily thereafter to inform every colored person he meets. We earnestly urge the co-operation of our citizens."¹¹⁰

The grave problem that grew out of this congested population was the housing conditions of the freedmen, and this, more than any other one thing, formed the basis of social antagonism between the two races. There were many poor whites as well as colored who were objects of pity and recipients of all there was for distribution, but they were in the minority and too, they were more readily tolerated on account of their color.¹¹¹

General Howard depicted the condition of these people as being a little less than horrible. They occupied localities where there were miserable hovels unfit for occupation by human beings. And in addition the landlords took advantage of them by charging exorbitant rent which increased their woes. Some were sleeping on the bare floor with blocks of wood for pillows while others could not find a dry spot in the shanties during the severest winter weather. In some extreme cases they had to pick up rags out of the streets for the purpose of mending their garments. So desperate was the situation and so determined were they to remain in Washington, where they could breathe the air of freedom, that General Howard recommended to the city authorities to have certain of these shanties destroyed and provisions made elsewhere.¹¹²

One spectator had the following to say: "There are certain localities then occupied by freedmen, which would be very likely to suggest the question, Are those people really better off now than they were in slavery?" The dwellings were put up at the cost of \$30, \$20 and even

¹⁰⁹ The National Intelligencer, April 6, 1866.

¹¹⁰ The National Intelligencer, April 6, 1866.

¹¹¹ Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 2nd Session, Vol. 76, p. 621.

¹¹² Senate Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd Session. No. 1276, p. 42.

\$10. Two rooms to a family were extremely rare for the majority of them were one room huts. In order to remove this stress and strain from human life brought on by excess charges for these hovels, tenements were prepared in certain of the public buildings by the Freedmen's Bureau.

Four Barracks were fitted up in and around Washington accommodating some 350 families and a like number were provided in Alexandria. Even though the accommodations were much more inviting, the cost of rent was about one-third of the price paid for the shanties previously occupied. This also reduced the rent on the places that remained, for the landlords found many of them vacant and left on their hands.¹¹³ The Bureau fitted up in addition 200 tenements at Campbell Hospital which were rented to families at \$3.00 per month as compared with \$5 and \$6 paid before for much less attractive and suitable places of habitation.

Next to the housing problems stands the problem of securing food and sufficient clothing for the unfortunates represented among them. To meet this situation many humane societies assumed the responsibility of relieving the suffering along these needy lines. One organization sent over \$1,000 worth of clothing, and after meeting the immediate needs they began to open up employment offices and sent many of the able-bodied men from the city to answer a special call for laborers in the State of Maryland. Quite a laudable work was accomplished by these friends, among whom was Miss Carter whose service can not be valued in terms of dollars and cents.¹¹⁴

General O. O. Howard announced on March 31, 1866, that the issuing of government supplies would be discontinued on the 10th of the following month, all soup houses would be closed, wood and other necessities would be no longer donated. Those who were on the sick list were taken in charge by the Medical Department of the Bureau. All the aged and infirm along with those permanently disabled would be provided with comfortable homes at Freedmen Village, Arlington, Va., and the Soldiers Rest at Alexandria.¹¹⁵

An organization of white friends known as the National Colored Home Association played an important part in social reforms among the colored people of the District. Headed by Mrs. Senator Trumbull, about 250 of these ladies presented a petition in person to the President asking that ten acres of the land owned by the rebel, R. S. Cox, be granted them. They desired to erect upon this land permanent homes

¹¹³ Senate Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd Session, Ser. No. 1276, p. 36.

¹¹⁴ The Freedmen's Record, p. 18.

¹¹⁵ The National Republican, March 31, 1866.

for the colored citizens of the District. This estate was seized by the city authorities, according to the law governing the property of rebels, to be disposed of in any way they deemed necessary. Quite a large number of mothers and children were then occupying, at the behest of the Association, such buildings as could be found upon the estate suitable for tenement purposes.¹¹⁶

Captain W. Spurgin, local superintendent of the Freedmen's Bureau, showed in his report that on an average, 335 persons were supplied daily with rations from only two soup houses and many of the sufferers received in addition other necessities which enabled them to survive the severe winter of 1866. That no cases of want might be overlooked, the Cities of Washington and Georgetown were divided into districts and put in charge of persons who had the welfare of the freedmen at heart. The recipients of these hospitalities, however, were not the strong and healthy bodied persons, but the aged and widows with children dependent for support.

It was also discovered in the reports that conditions among the poor classes had been greatly exaggerated for during the previous month more than 300 freedmen had been furnished employment. That a social reformation was under way was apparent in every section of the city and District. This report was verified by the health statistics of Surgeon R. Reyburn of the Bureau of Refugees and Freedmen, who stated that during the same severe winter there were treated in one month 2,181 patients and of this number only 72 proved fatal. 1,348 were cured and discharged, while 797 remained under treatment.¹¹⁷

Resolutions were presented to Congress asking aid for the suffering widows and children whose husbands and fathers were away in the service of the Union Army. As a result of these petitions Congress made an appropriation of \$25,000 for relief purposes but all of this amount did not go to the colored alone as was shown in the report. The poor whites whose condition paralleled that of the colored received a larger portion of this fund. Special relief agents were employed to study conditions in the various localities of both races and report the same to the Bureau which was in charge of the disbursements.

The report showed that upon the recommendation of said agents, 965 whites and 827 colored shared in the donation. For immediate relief, \$3,421.24 was given for the benefit of the whites and \$2,665.14 went to the colored. It was stipulated in the grants made by Congress

¹¹⁶ The Senate Miscellaneous Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd Session. No. 14. Ser. No. 1278.

¹¹⁷ Senate Documents, 39th Congress, 2nd Session. No. 6. Serial No. 1276, p. 37.

that all sufferers irrespective of color would be the beneficiaries.¹¹⁸ It can be seen from this report that the poor class of colored citizens in the District of Columbia compared favorably with similar groups of whites during the same social crisis.

It was also reported that politicians who desired to rid the city of colored people stretched these reports for propaganda purposes. Many of the accounts given in the dailies by this class of citizens made false impressions as to the actual condition of the freedmen. Even the sanitary conditions as early as September 12, 1865 were reported much improved over the previous year. The *National Intelligencer* carried an article which gave the foregoing impressions as follows: "The local Commissioner for Washington of Freedmen's Affairs reports that the general sanitary condition of the colored population of the city is good."¹¹⁹ Thus it is clear that even though the question of housing and clothing the freedmen constituted a grave problem, it is hard to ascertain the correct status of their social life.

The major problem which the colored people had to encounter during these crucial days was "Race prejudice," which made its way into every walk of life. The *National Republican* made a lengthy comment on the social conditions. The irrepressible conflict, as stated, referred to the objections of white citizens, residing in the aristocratic section of the city, to General O. O. Howard establishing colored schools in that vicinity. This was in the neighborhood of 14th Street and Massachusetts Avenue and the citizens urged that he have them removed. They protested on the grounds that the coming of the colored people in that vicinity would cause the price of real estate to be depreciated and thereby injure the property. The editorial made the following significant statement: "If colored schools will depreciate the price of real estate in Washington, so that people could buy it at reasonable prices and live here, it is to be hoped that there is to be a larger increase of colored schools."¹²⁰

This hideous spirit not only crept into civic reforms but made its early advent into churches and other religious organizations. White and colored had been intermingling in churches and Sunday Schools but objections were soon raised to this custom of worship and the freedmen's children were forced to seek other quarters. This not only impaired the spiritual work but the literary preparation was seriously affected since these Sunday Schools took over quite a bit of the public school work.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Report of Commissioner of Bureau of Refugees, pp. 26-27.

¹¹⁹ The *National Intelligencer*, September 12, 1865.

¹²⁰ The *National Republican*, August 18, 1865.

¹²¹ U. S. Commissioner of Education for D. C., 1868, pp. 195-217.

At this time there were many social and political organizations which held their meetings in churches and other places of worship. This afforded a pretext for the whites who complained that because these gatherings were not strictly religious in their nature they should not be tolerated in places consecrated for religious services. A striking example of this was the schism in the First Presbyterian Church, caused by the admission of Frederick Douglass into its sacred chambers to deliver a lecture. Frederick Douglass had been invited by the National Home Association for Colored Orphans of which Mrs. Senator Wade was President. He was introduced by Chief Justice Chase who spoke in high terms of him as an orator and leader of his race.

Beside the objections to the nature of the meeting, there was also objection to the promiscuous gathering of whites and blacks in the church for the purpose of discussing secular matters. As to the nature of the meeting, they were of the opinion that since it was wholly divorced from the spiritual interest of the church, it tended to desecrate and bring the church into great disrepute.¹²² The meeting was largely attended by members of Congress and other prominent white citizens who spoke in complimentary terms of the manner in which Mr. Douglass delivered his address. Following this the Trustees and Special Committee pledged themselves to oppose any attempt on the part of the colored people to repeat the act of meeting in the church.

Still others objected because the meeting was called during the absence of the pastor, Rev. Sunderland, who was on a trip abroad. It was discovered during the controversy that the officials were not in accord with the administration of the pastor and a large number had quit the church because of the very liberal views he held touching the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man. Those who opposed the meeting on the grounds of impropriety, since the pastor was absent, were found to be the same disgruntled element that opposed his administration. The final analysis, however, proved the case to be one of social discrimination.¹²³

Notwithstanding the temporary outbreak of ill temper between the races, the Negroes gradually arose to prominence and filled many positions of honor and trust. This was demonstrated when Chief Justice Chase entered the halls of the Supreme Court with Rev. W. H. Beecher and took seats on the platform. A little later the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet entered and occupied a seat beside Mr. Beecher. Chief Justice Chase called the meeting to order and introduced Rev. H. Garnet who offered prayer. Even on this occasion a white female spectator

¹²² The Daily Morning Chronicle, February 14, 1866.

¹²³ Ibid. February 16, 1866.

became so indignant that while the minister prayed she turned her back and was heard saying something to the effect that it was a disgrace for a colored man to pray to so large a crowd of whites; hence she hastened away from the hall in the midst of hissing jeers. Prior to this, Rev. Garnet had been signally honored by the House of Representatives, which body, at the suggestion of the chaplain, invited him to deliver the opening sermon at the opening of its annual session. He preached from Matthew 23:4, and chose as a theme, "Freedom." This message was published verbatim and received the most favorable comment from the public.¹²⁴

At this period of their social progress, the colored people began to discover that the most vital need of any struggling race was unity, and at once social organizations began to take form with a definite policy for racial development. This organized effort empowered the leaders of this group to become the voice of the people. Among the early agencies that gave the colored people prestige in politics was the Republican Club. This Club met in the different wards of the city at short intervals. John F. Cook was one of the first to serve as President of this Club, with Wm. H. Lewis as Secretary. At one of these meetings a petition was presented requesting the Club to investigate the complaints made by employees who were working at the Eastern Branch Carrol. They stated that on election days they were kept from the polls by Supt. Riley who detained them until 8 P. M., at which hour the booths were closed. This was done for the purpose of defeating some of the candidates who were relying upon the colored support.

A general complaint was also lodged against Superintendent Riley for maladministration. They alleged that half the amount of rations due them were advanced and that they were forced to work on Sunday. The Club immediately took action and Mr. O. S. Baker, white, moved that a special committee of three be appointed to make investigations and report its findings to the next meeting. Resolutions were read authorizing the committee to obtain legal advice as to the propriety of nominating colored men for office in the pending election. After some sharp clashes on the question it was deemed wise to withhold colored nominations at that time.

That the white people were aware of the issue raised by this Club and that the better class approved of the manly stand taken by the colored people may be seen by the article which followed commenting upon section 5 of the city Charter which prohibited office holding by the Negroes in the District of Columbia.¹²⁵ A similar organization

¹²⁴ The National Intelligencer, February, 1865.

¹²⁵ The Washington Evening Star, May 2, 1867.

known as the Equal Right League which immortalized its name during the suffrage campaign, was a dynamic power for social uplift among the colored citizens of the District. When any great cause was presented to the public or to Congress in interest of the Negro these agencies were brought into play by public meetings, newspaper articles and petitions.¹²⁶

When those in authority observed that the colored people were being enlightened along the lines of social reforms and racial integrity, they began to recognize the pleas for justice, and to listen to the appeals as coming from a group of citizens who constituted a vital part of the population and was destined to hold the balance of political power in the District of Columbia. This impression was never more vividly seen than when Dr. J. R. Hayes gave the public his essay titled, "Negrophobia on the Brain of the White Men." In this treatise he expressed the opinion that white office seekers were playing a political game with the colored people for selfish purposes. This was accomplished through flattery which had created a feeling and opinion that the Negro was the embodiment of all that was noble and excellent.

In the attempt to establish his claims, Dr. Hayes stated that Washington, the Capital of the Nation was selected as the site for the demonstration of Negro superiority and to exhibit him to the world as the "Ne plus ultra" of the human race. He further lamented the fact that some whites were so infatuated over the Negro that they sent their children to Negro schools and grew optimistic enough to anticipate a time when the Negroes would hold the destiny of the District in the grasp of their political power. Thus it is apparent that work of these organizations created an unrest that was destined to sweep him into his own.¹²⁷

Following in the wake of organizations for social reforms there arose organizations for moral reforms. The colored citizens were keenly aware of the fact that the permanent success of any social movement depended largely upon a proper conception of moral and ethical values. As a result the organization known as the Lincoln National Temperance Association came into being. This was the first of its kind to function among the Negroes of the District of Columbia and was sponsored by General O. O. Howard. The influence of this movement was felt throughout the Southern States where many branches of the order were established. Members of the organization pledged themselves not to make, buy, use, or sell any beverage or spirits of malt liquors. It stressed the necessity of possessing a strong physical body which was the basis of a healthy and robust mind.

¹²⁶ The Daily Morning Chronicle, December 19, 1865.

¹²⁷ Negrophobia on the Brain of the White Man, Dr. J. R. Hayes.

For the children there was organized the Vanguard of Freedmen. Membership qualification was the same as that in the senior society with the exception of the by-laws which were made more simple so as to meet the needs of all conditions. This society started the youth out with an ideal set as a lofty objective for life and its influence was reflected in the general deportment of the young people.¹²⁸ All these agencies were but the manifestations of the Negro's ambition to become a worthy citizen.

To equip themselves better in the essentials of argumentation and to supply the amount of culture and refinement necessary to cope with the best in the opposite race, debating clubs and literary societies were organized. The following is a brief account of such agencies: "A colored literary organization known as the Howard Debating Society meets each Monday night at the Soldiers' Free Library rooms, corner of 5th and E Streets. The meetings are usually largely attended and much interest is manifested both by audience and members."¹²⁹

The church was another institution that held a unique place in the social life of the people during the Reconstruction. The early history of the Negro church in the District of Columbia is interwoven with that of the white church, for long before the colored churches launched out upon an independent career they were under the foster care of the white church. At first this union was characterized by the spirit of brotherhood but as time increased the colored membership became an undesirable element. Among those churches that first admitted the colored communicants on equal terms with theirs were the following: The First Baptist church established in 1802, Christ Church, located at the Navy Yard, established in 1812. This church was also instrumental in establishing a Sunday School for the colored prior to 1812, the Unitarian Church established in 1820 which maintained to the last a record of brotherly treatment of its colored constituents.¹³⁰

In 1820 a spirit of contention cropped out among the whites who objected to the colored occupying seats in the main auditorium. The first step in eliminating them was to assign them to back seats in the majority of the churches throughout the District. This grievance was added to by the second step which required all the colored people to occupy the galleries in the churches. In 1820 the spirit of resentment caused the colored members of Ebenezer Church on 4th Street to sever their relation and establish a log cabin for worship in the immediate vicinity. A little later these were joined by others who could not tolerate

¹²⁸ The Washington Evening Star, June 22, 1867.

¹²⁹ The Daily Morning Chronicle, October 8, 1867.

¹³⁰ U. S. Commissioner of Education for D. C., 1868, p. 221.

the hostile attitude of the whites. They purchased the First Presbyterian Church at the foot of Capitol Hill, later known as Israel Bethel A. M. E. Church. Another faction pulled out of Ebenezer and purchased a lot on the corner of C and 5th Streets Southeast. Upon this lot they erected what was called the "Little Ebenezer M. E. Church."¹³¹

In 1821 the spirit of unrest was manifested in Georgetown where the same situation obtained. Here the Rev. Stephen H. Styng was pastor of the St. John's Church. The pastor did not cater to the public sentiment but was finally compelled to acknowledge their wishes. This congregation objected to the colored people passing through the front door to their assigned place in the gallery. To the pastor's regret, they erected a stair-way on the outside of the church, which approached the gallery from the rear. This flight of steps was called, "The Niggers back stairs to Heaven." The colored people retaliated by pulling out and establishing a Colored Episcopal Church on 23rd Street, known as St. Mary's Chapel. The Rev. John M. E. McKee became the pastor.¹³²

In 1831 Nat Turner's insurrection brought on a wave of discontent which precipitated a crisis in the District of Columbia. It caused all the colored communicants to be expelled from churches and Sunday Schools under the auspices of white people. Only the Catholic Churches maintained them. This, however, did not have the serious effect anticipated, for the expulsion meant self-reliance, an indispensable element in leadership. A large number of Sunday Schools were soon established which served as substitutes for churches. During this mob period a few white friends favored the unfortunate colored people by aiding them in the work. Private Sunday Schools were established in the homes of these sympathizers. An example of this is seen in the one organized by Mrs. Coxe in her parlor, where she taught them all the rudiments of education in addition.¹³³

These schools formed nuclei for church organizations; the second one which was organized in the Smothers School in 1832 became the First Presbyterian Church known as the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. This was established in November, 1841, by Rev. John C. Smith. Rev. John F. Cook became the first pastor and assumed control July 13, 1843. A white Baptist Church on 10th Street was the next to segregate her Negro constituency. In 1833 the members relinquished this property, which later became the Ford's Theatre, and located in a new site. The colored people in turn purchased the old

¹³¹ U. S. Commissioner of Education for the D. C., 1868, p. 219.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹³³ U. S. Commissioner of Education for the D. C., 1868, pp. 200, 215.

church on the corner of 19th & I Streets.¹³⁴ This was the reaction to the prejudices on the part of the whites.

In 1835 another faction severed its relation with the Ebenezer Church on 4th Street. This was caused by the pastor's refusing to take colored children in his arms, as he held the whites, during the baptismal service. These dissenters united in establishing the Wesley Zion Church in 1839. The church directory of 1855 showed that there were 800 colored children in attendance at these Sunday Schools which grew out of this crucial period.¹³⁵ That steady progress was made along all social and religious lines is self-evident in the number of churches owned by Negroes at the close of the Reconstruction. The church directory of 1868 gives them credit for 13 out of 57 churches in the District of Columbia, all of which were established after the social crisis.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹³⁵ *Churches and Pastors of Washington, D. C., 1855*, p. 133. By C. Johnson.

¹³⁶ U. S. Commissioner of Education for D. C., 1868, p. 46.