

A Colored Convention

In February, 1868, a series of amendments eliminating the word "white" from five sections of the Iowa Constitution was under consideration in the legislature, having already been adopted by the Eleventh General Assmby in 1866. Naturally the colored residents of Iowa — the beneficiaries of the proposed amendments — were interested in the success of the resolution, and a call was sent out for what was probably the first convention of colored people held in Iowa. This invitation was signed by twenty-two representatives of that race, led by Reverend J. W. Malone of Keokuk and the Reverend S. T. Wells of Des Moines. It read as follows:

FELLOW CITIZENS: In the exercise of a liberty which we hope you will not deem unwarrantable, and which is given us by virtue of our connection and identity with you, as an oppressed and disfranchised people, the undersigned do hereby, most earnestly and affectionately, invite you, *en masse*, or by your chosen representatives, to assemble in Convention, in the City of Des Moines, on the 12th day of February, 1868, at 10 o'clock A. M., for the purpose of considering the question of our enfranchisement, which is now before the Legislature and will soon be submitted to the voters of Iowa for their votes. All in favor of equal rights, come! Strike for freedom whilst it is day!

The date set for the convention was the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, patron saint of the freedmen; and on that day over thirty delegates appeared at Burn's Chapel in Des Moines where the meeting was

to be held. Each delegate was taxed one dollar to defray expenses. While a few failed to make this contribution, it appears that five delegates not only paid their own share but added two dollars as the amount credited to the towns from which they came.

The convention organized in due form with J. W. Malone of Keokuk as president. Two vice presidents, a secretary, and two assistant secretaries were likewise chosen. A resolution in honor of Abraham Lincoln and a code of rules for the government of the convention were adopted; and a committee of three was appointed to prepare an address to be presented to the people of Iowa.

This address, it appears, was delivered before the assembly by Alex. Clark, the chairman of the committee. It was a plea for the enfranchisement of colored men by the striking of the word "white" from the Constitution of the State. "Having established our claim to the proud title of American soldiers", reads part of the address, "and shared in the glories won by the deeds of the true men of our own color, will you not heed and hear our appeal? We ask, in the honored name of 200,000 colored troops, five hundred of whom were from our own Iowa, who, with the first opportunity, enlisted under the flag of our country and the banner of our State while the franchised rebels and their cowardly friends, the now bitter enemies of our right to suffrage, remained in quiet

at home, safe, and fattened on the fruits of our sacrifice, toil and blood.”

At the evening session on the first day of the convention Alex. Clark — apparently considered the Demosthenes of the assembly — addressed the delegates “by special request”. Mr. Henry O’Connor, the Attorney General of the State, also made a speech which was described as “clear, strong, pointed and eloquent”. Among the resolutions adopted, the first two read as follows:

RESOLVED, That we still have confidence in the Republican Congress of the United States and the Republican party of Iowa, and rest in the hope that they will do all that can be done to secure us our full rights and protect our friends in the South from wrong and oppression.

RESOLVED, That the tendency toward enlarged freedom which distinguishes our age, which in England bears the name of Reform, in Ireland the title of Fenianism, in Europe the name of Progress, and in this government the name of Radicalism, impresses us with the firm conviction that our claims to universal suffrage and impartial justice at home and abroad will soon be secured to all.

The convention also expressed its gratitude to Attorney General O’Connor “for his independent and manly opinion, as given to the Legislature, upon the legality of submitting the question of suffrage by the present Legislature to the people at the next general election.” Likewise the activities of one of their own number in behalf of the colored people was recognized by the following resolution:

RESOLVED, That, having watched with much diligence and deep interest the course pursued on all questions affecting the well being of the colored people of Iowa by our friend and fellow citizen, A. Clark, that he has, as he must ever have, our full confidence and grateful thanks, but more especially in this last great and noble act in defending the rights of our children to be admitted into the public schools of the State, as the Constitution warrants.

This convention may be commended for economy. The finance committee reported a total of \$38.44 in cash collections; the expenses were \$11.73; and the balance was appropriated for printing the proceedings of the convention.

A number of ten minute speeches marked the closing session on the evening of February 13th, although an exception was made in favor of J. W. Malone, the president, who was allowed thirty minutes. At the close of the meeting the members marched around the room shaking hands and singing "Blow ye the trumpet, blow!"

In due time the amendments were adopted by the Twelfth General Assembly, ratified by a popular vote of 105,384 to 81,119 on November 3, 1868, and proclaimed a part of the Constitution on December 8, 1868. Thus the colored men of Iowa secured the coveted political equality two years before the adoption of the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

RUTH A. GALLAHER