

COLORED CONVENTIONS, talk by Denise Burgher

Good afternoon League of Women Voters! My name is Denise Burgher. I am a member of the colored conventions project housed at the University of Delaware. Samantha DeVera is a team member and the co-chair of the exhibits team. Thank you so much for the invitation to share with you this afternoon.

The National League of Women Voters was founded by Carrie Chapman Catt in 1920, during the first convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The 1920s were a time of swift and dramatic both social and political change. Also, known as the Roaring 20s, this was an era defined by Movement---more Americans lived in cities versus on farms. Between 1920 and 1929, economic growth ushered many Americans into an affluent but unfamiliar “consumer society.” Thus, America, was fraught with anxiety about social and cultural change. It was at this moment, after being an organizer for quite some time that educator and activist Chapman Catt founded the LWW.

Chapman Catt was utterly convinced that organizing and empowering women would and could to lead to the fundamental changes needed in society to realize world peace. What this literally means is that Chapman Catt believed that women, organized and active could change the world in the midst of rapid changes. Chapman Catt envisioned a world and roles for women completely different from the one they had occupied.

It is important to think deeply about our history. Embedded in the choices, decision and lives of our leaders are the strands of organizational DNA which influence and guide the groups in which we participate. Therefore, it is in history that we can find clarity and inspiration as well as cautions and warnings. Many of the issues Chapman Catt was concerned about: elimination of child labor laws, broad

access to quality education, fair and impartial juries, she believed could be realized when women secured the vote. Unsurprisingly, the National American Women Suffrage Association was held just six months before the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote after a 72-year struggle.

Not unlike the LWW, the Colored Convention Movement began when a group of men and women in 1830 decided that organized, they could be more effective than working as individuals. Pastors, preachers, newspaper editors, lawyers and business people gathered with men and women from all walks of life and created the first colored convention held in Philadelphia at the Bethel AME church under the direction of Bishop Richard Allen. As the LWW, the colored conventions were called to support and direct a concerned response to a set of contemporary issues: the instigating incident: official and clandestine enforcement of Black Codes in Ohio.

In many ways, Ohio became a proving ground for a pattern of legal and extra abuses of African Americans in America during the nineteenth century. Ohio, a free state by state constitutional decree, passed a series of laws called the Black Codes in 1804. The laws, passed the year the state became free in 1804, targeted Free Blacks in the state and potential free Blacks migrants from coming into Ohio—a free state surrounded by slave states in a country where slavery was legal. Among other provisions, these laws required Black people to prove that they were not slaves and to find at least two white people, of good repute who would guarantee a surety of five hundred dollars for African Americans' good behavior. The laws limited African Americans' rights to gun-ownership, juries, the voting booth, as well as to several other freedoms that all whites held and that African Americans in Ohio practiced before the passage and enforcement of the laws.

As the national debates about slavery became more contentious, free states like Ohio were under greater scrutiny and politicians responded by enforcing these laws in

ways heretofore unseen. Unsurprisingly, these laws impacted the unleashed a litany of violent and destructive actions by whites against black outside of the legal and judicial systems. In our time, we might be able to make a connection between the ways that violence of speech make more acceptable violent actions. Historian Leon Litwack explains,

No extensive effort was made to enforce the bond requirement until 1829, when the rapid increase of the Negro population alarmed Cincinnati. The city authorities announced that the Black Laws would be enforced and ordered Negroes to comply or leave within thirty days." Citizens of the city's "Little Africa" -- largely a ghetto of wooden shacks owned by whites -- appealed for a delay, and sent a delegation to Canada to try to find a place to settle there. But if the authorities were willing to offer more time, the Ohio mob was not, and whites in packs roamed through the black neighborhoods, burning and beating. The delegation came back from Upper Canada with the offer of a safe home from the governor. "Tell the Republicans on your side of the line that we royalists do not know men by their color. Should you come to us you will be entitled to all the privileges of the rest of His Majesty's subjects." About half of the city's 2,200 blacks left, most of going to Canada. The proponents of strict enforcement of the Black Laws then discovered that they had driven off "the sober, honest, industrious, and useful portion of the colored population,".[3]

Though this historical account of the persecution departure of African Americans from Ohio does not mention the colored convention movement, it was actually the organized group of concerned and committed citizens in Philadelphia I mentioned who responded to the plight of their fellow citizens. In that first colored convention meeting, African Americans met, discussed, planned, raised money, mediated between the government and the African American residents of Ohio and established a community in Chatham and Buxton Canada for the Black residents to migrate. And they did.

After this successful feat of organization, the colored conventions did not stop. Having responded to that crisis, organizers decided to continue meeting and responding to the multiple crises facing African Americans: slavery, lack of access to public educations, lack of access to the jury box, lack of access to the voting booth, lack of access to public education despite being required to pay taxes, lack of protection from police brutality, fair labors indeed the list seems unending. And in many ways, it was.

The determination to organize, educate and encourage citizens to shape the democracy they wish to experience, the country they hope to leave as a legacy for their children and grandchildren did not abate. The colored convention movement continued from 1830 to the early 1900s. Hundreds of thousands of African American delegates met, organized and responded to issues, crises and events that reverberated across the nation and the world. The meetings were public—held in churches, Freemason lodges and lyceums. Meetings followed strict parliamentary rules of order and significant work was accomplished: the creation of Talladega College, the establishment of Black newspapers, the charter to found Howard Law School in Washington DC among others. Meticulous minutes were kept and published for sale. The meetings were widely covered in both the Black and white press.

The question that you might have in mind, why have I not heard anything about this? The popular historical record of America features the usual suspects when it refers to periods that as a nation, we probably would prefer to forget. Who comes to mind when you think of Abolition? William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Quakers? Maybe Frederick Douglass. The list of abolitionists, the people we credit with bringing slavery to its knees tends to be largely white. The truth is, African Americans were actively involved in abolition among a host of other political and social organizing. But the image of African Americans organizing petitions, appealing

to the Supreme Court, negotiation with foreign governments for relief does not align with images of Black inferiority, ignorance, immoral characters or profligacy. In fact, it would almost seem that if the history of the United States was one where African Americans were intelligently and actively and passionately and strategically involved in shaping our democracy, creating the lives we wished to lead then, American history would need to change. Instead of changing, there was a process of historical unmaking. The history of the colored convention movement was unremembered from the pages of dominant histories.

The Colored Conventions Project seeks to resurrect these histories. We look for, find and digitize and make fully accessible the minutes, proceedings and memorials produced by the colored convention movement. To date, we have a bit over three hundred convention uploaded to our site. We currently have over 95 conventions and memorials in the pipeline and continue to find look for more. We find colored conventions in 19th century newspapers, in historical societies, basements, and personal collections. The most interesting find we have made to date was a historian in the Kew Museum in London, who after learning about us on Twitter, found and photographed the proceedings form an Indiana convention and sent them to us. These were minutes of a colored convention which up until that date we did not know existed. The process continues. The opportunity to speak with you ladies this afternoon is a part of insuring that the existence of the colored conventions and the importance of the work of our 19th century forbears continues to influence the ways we choose to live in the world.

Instead of accepting an intolerable, unjust and or unacceptable set of social and civic conditions, the organizers of the colored conventions movement seized every chance they could get to organize, stand together and insist that the world they knew, the world they had inherited, the roles society had ascribed would and did

change. And ladies, I would suggest that this is a charge that the LWW's incredible work around voting demonstrates is a shared conviction. In such a time as this, not unlike those faced by the members of the colored conventions movement during the 19th century, I believe the work of the LWW is more critical than ever.

Thank you for inviting us to share about the Colored Conventions with you!

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