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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1971

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The Negro Convention Movement Before The Civil War

by CLIFTON H. JOHNSON

THE three decades or more preceding the Civil War were an era of reform efforts in the United States characterized by such activities as the antislavery crusade and movements for universal manhood (white, most often) suffrage, common schools, temperance, peace, Sabbath observance, women's rights, missions, and a multitude of other causes. The chief modus operandi by which the people became involved in these movements, was conventions at the local, state, national and frequently international levels. The development, therefore, of the National Convention Movement among the free Negro population of the United States was only a natural occurrence in antebellum America. In 1830 there were 319,000 free Negroes in the United States. In the North they were active in the antislavery movement from its beginning and they also participated with whites in conventions devoted to other popular reform efforts. However, there were problems of the day that were peculiar to the free Negro and it was the desire to deal with these problems that provided the impetus and sustaining force for the Negro Convention Movement.

The meeting of the first Negro Convention, held in Philadelphia, September 20-24, 1830, and presided over by Richard Allen, antedated by three years the formation of the American Antislavery Society. The Convention was attended by twenty-six delegates from seven states. The delegates adopted an address to the free Negro population denouncing the repressive legislation and deplorable practices under which so-called "free" men of color were forced to suffer and passed resolutions condemning the American Colonization Society. At the same time, however, emigration to Canada was encouraged as an alternative to American repression. Annual National Negro Conventions were held through 1835. The delegates regularly condemned the institutions of slavery and the American Colonization Society. On the other hand, they came to accept the view of white abolitionists that no Negro was free so long as his brother remained a slave and that the responsibility of the Northern Negroes, especially those of education and leadership capacities, was not to attempt escape from the evils of slavery and prejudice through emigration but to remain in the United States and join forces with white abolitionists in the struggle to rid the nation of slavery and its consequences. The most distinctive efforts of the Conventions of the 1830's

[[images - black & white photographs of 12 African-American men]]



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