



## Smithsonian Institution

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

### Delegate Magazine 1971

Extracted on Oct-01-2022 06:58:42

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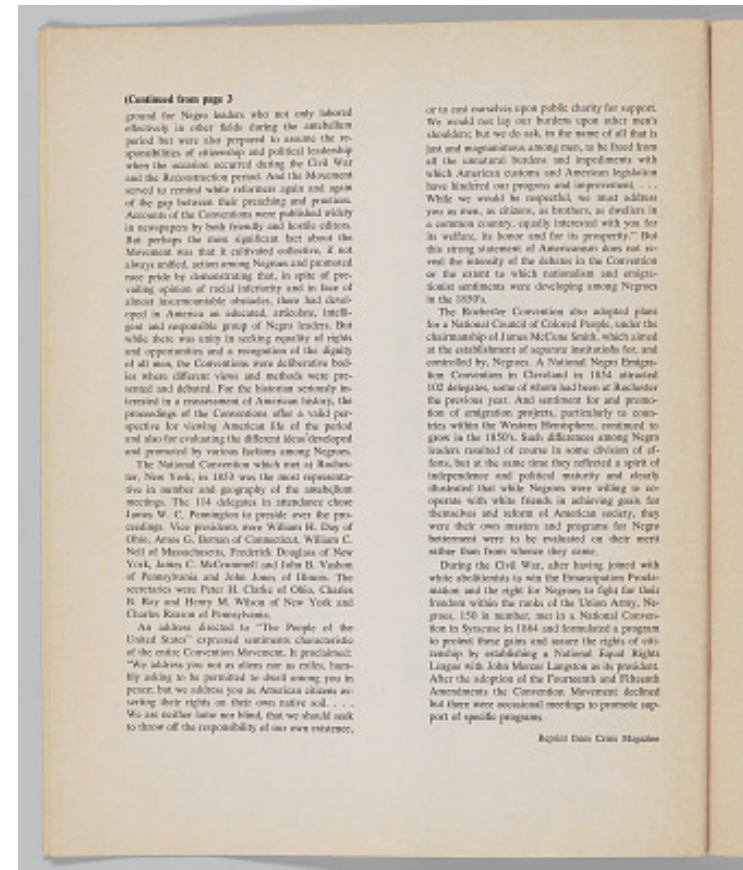
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ground for Negro leaders who not only labored effectively in other fields during the antebellum period but were also prepared to assume the responsibilities of citizenship and political leadership when the occasion occurred during the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. And the Movement served to remind white reformers again and again of the gap between their preaching and practices. Accounts of the Conventions were published widely in newspapers by both friendly and hostile editors. But perhaps the most significant fact about the Movement was that it cultivated collective, if not always unified, action among Negroes and promoted race pride by demonstrating that, in spite of prevailing opinions of racial inferiority and in face of almost insurmountable obstacles, there had developed in America an educated, articulate, intelligent and responsible group of Negro leaders. But while there was unity in seeking equality of rights and opportunities and a recognition of the dignity of all men, the Conventions were deliberative bodies where different views and methods were presented and debated. For the historian seriously interested in a reassessment of American history, the proceedings of the Conventions offer a valid perspective for viewing American life of the period and also for evaluating the different ideas developed and promoted by various factions among Negroes.

The National Convention which met at Rochester, New York, in 1853 was the most representative in number and geography of the antebellum meetings. The 114 delegates in attendance chose James W. C. Pennington to preside over the proceedings. Vice presidents were William H. Day of Ohio, Amos G. Beman of Connecticut, William C. Nell of Massachusetts, Frederick Douglass of New York, James C. McCrummell and John B. Vashon of Pennsylvania and John Jones of Illinois. The secretaries were Peter H. Clarke of Ohio, Charles B. Ray and Henry M. Wilson of New York and Charles Reason of Pennsylvania.

An address directed to "The People of the United States" expressed sentiments characteristic of the entire Convention Movement. It proclaimed "We address you not as aliens nor as exiles, humbly asking to be permitted to dwell among you in peace; but we address you as American citizens asserting their rights on their own native soil.... We are neither lame nor blind, that we should seek to throw off the responsibility of our own existence, or to cast ourselves upon public charity for support. We would not lay our burdens upon other men's shoulders; but we do ask, in the name of all that is just and magnanimous among men, to be freed from all the unnatural burdens and impediments with which American customs and American legislation have hindered our progress and improvement.... While we would be respectful, we must address you as me, as citizens, as brothers, as dwellers in a common country, equally interested with you for its welfare, its honor and for its prosperity." But this strong statement of Americanism does not reveal the intensity of the debates in the Convention or the extent to which nationalism and emigrationist sentiments were developing among Negroes in the 1850's.

The Rochester Convention also adopted plans for a National Council of Colored People, under the chairmanship of James McCune Smith, which aimed at the establishment of separate institutions for, and controlled by, Negroes. A National Negro Emigration Convention in Cleveland in 1854 attracted 102 delegates, some of whom had been at Rochester the previous year. And sentiment for and promotion of emigration projects, particularly to countries within the Western



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During the Civil War, after having joined with white abolitionists to win the Pennsylvania Freedmen and the right for Negroes to fight for their freedom within the ranks of the Union Army, Negroes, 150 in number, met in a National Convention in Syracuse in 1864 and formulated a program to protect their gains and secure the rights of citizenship by establishing a National Equal Rights League with John Mercer Langston as its president. After the adoption of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments the Convention Movement declined but there were occasional meetings to promote support of specific programs.

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