

The Black Vote of Philadelphia

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The typical Philadelphia colored man is a young immigrant from the South, from twenty to forty years of age, who has come to the city to better his fortune, as he conceives fortune. His conception of government, as he comes into a great modern world city, is extremely crude. He knows practically nothing of the actual work of any typical government,—local government in the South is a Chinese puzzle to the average citizen; the Negro sees it only in its repressive and harrying functions, and he is allowed to take little or no part in it. The chances are, then, that the young immigrant to Philadelphia has no adequate idea of his duty or privilege as a citizen and has thought little about them, save perhaps in a more or less theoretical way. He comes to find work and freedom—and by freedom he means a chance for expansion, amusement, interest, something to make life larger than it has been on the lonely country plantation, or in the Negro quarter of a southern town. His contact with the new world, then, is as wage-earner and seeker after the goods of life—knowledge and amusement; with this goes the untrammelled right to vote—a right he has never before had, and which his brothers in Philadelphia have not always had.

The laws of 1682 for the new state of Pennsylvania made property holders voters and made the qualifications for freedmen less than those for others. Negro electors undoubtedly helped to adopt the constitution, as the right of suffrage after 1776 was given to "every freeman of the full age of twenty-one years, having resided in this state for the space of one whole year." When the new state constitution of 1790 was framed, it was proposed to limit the suffrage to "free white citizens;" but Albert Gallatin helped to defeat this proposition, and Negroes in the state had the legal right to vote for a half century thereafter. Still public opinion in many cases was against Negroes voting, and in Philadelphia "the colored man could not with safety appear at the polls." One

Negro man named Fogg, having been denied the right to vote in Luzerne County, took the case to the courts in 1837. He won in the lower courts but the Supreme Court in a curious decision upheld the exclusion, claiming that a Negro though free could never be a "freeman." The next year the constitutional convention met. The qualifications for suffrage came up and an attempt was made to restrict voting to "free white male" citizens. The amendment was lost by a vote of 61 to 49. This aroused the Negro haters and they began the same sort of campaign of vilification and detraction that the black men of America so often have suffered. Petitions for and against Negro suffrage poured in, but only the latter were printed and published, and Bucks County, where once a Negro nearly had been elected to the legislature, outdid itself in working for exclusion. The result was a protracted fight, and a final adoption of the white suffrage plank by a vote of 77 to 45. The Negroes of Pennsylvania were thus disfranchised for thirty-two years, until the passage of the war amendments.

About 5,500 Negroes were eligible to vote in Philadelphia in 1870. In 1900 there were 20,000 Negro voters and in 1905 there are perhaps 25,000 voters.

Nothing in the Negro immigrant's earning of a living is apt to direct his attention to government unless, of course, he is employed by the city. He is usually employed as servant or laborer by private parties and sees little more of government than when he was in the South. When, after work, and on Sundays and holidays, he starts out for recreation he is apt in the denser parts of the city to run upon two and only two rival claimants for his interest: the church and the club. Parks and out-of-door sports do not attract him, for he has the country-bred indifference to raw nature and his daily work is largely physical. He is not welcome at the white Young Men's Christian Association, while the Negro branch is a sickly sort of thing constituted largely of prayer meetings and cant. All the ordi-

nary amusements of a great city are either unknown and unappreciated by this newcomer, or he feels by word or glance that he is not wanted. There is left, as I have said, the club and the church. Now the church he knows and knows well: it has been the center of his community from the days his fathers landed in America until now. The chances are, however, that this young man has tired of the monotony of church services and their lack of adaptability to his newer needs and demands; in the South, he has loafed outside the door to laugh and joke and escort his girl home; and he does not take the church seriously—he is rather tired of it.

The Political Club.

As he saunters up Lombard street, then, of evenings, he may drop into the church if it is Sunday, and other days he stands lonesomely about, gaping and longing for a fellow soul. But he finds soon that at one place he is welcome and that is at the club. He may be introduced to the club accidentally or by design, through the medium of the saloon or corner pool-room, or by chance companions. At any rate he finds here and there throughout the city ten or fifteen little groups of good fellows—gay young blades, roystering tellers of doubtful tales, well-dressed connoisseurs of the town's mysteries, and they welcome the newcomer cordially and make him feel at home. No where in Philadelphia is there such a welcome for the friendless, homeless black boy, no where is so much consideration shown for his feelings, his wants, his desire for pleasure. He easily joins therefore the crowd of loafers and idlers and laborers who circle and congregate about these clubs.

What is a "club?" He finds that it is a suite of rooms more or less elaborately furnished where a crowd of men can always be found smoking and talking and drinking. Usually, too, they play cards for small stakes and sometimes gamble with various devices for sums mounting up to \$25 or more. Here one may make all kinds of acquaintances from honest laborers to drunken debauchees—and the clubs grade from semi-criminal haunts to respectable well-furnished quarters. Nearly all of them, however, and particularly the lower grades, are above all

"political," and they give our young immigrant his first introduction into "politics." He comes to know gradually that these pleasant quarters where his friends meet and enjoy themselves are furnished through "politics;" that if it were not for "politics" they could not have beer to drink or play cards in peace. Moreover, there is poor John So and So arrested ~~and~~ ~~we'll~~ get clear by "politics." Is the new Philadelphian willing to help along the folks who are doing these kindnesses to him and his? Why, certainly. And when election day comes he receives a bit of printed paper with unknown names and deposits it in a place indicated.

It may be now that he becomes one of the constituent members of the club, being invited by the president. This president selects his own membership of tried and true men warranted to do as he says: he keeps his hold over them by furnishing them amusement if they are honest laborers, or by giving them money if they are poor laborers out of a job, or loafers, or by protecting them if they fall afoul of the police. The newcomer soon sees that he is in a network of intrigue, influence and bribery. The policeman on his beat, the magistrate, the criminal, the prostitute, the business man, all fit in their little circle in the great "machine," and this is "politics;"—of certain questions as to the ownership of gas works, the payment for franchises, the reform of the civil service—of these things he has never heard; he is submerged in a sea of mud and slime called politics which the great and good and wise city of Philadelphia has prepared for him; he has never seen its shores or surface, and of its clearer, sweeter waters he has never heard.

Other Groups. Of the 25,000 Negro voters in Philadelphia from one-half to two-thirds fall into the class I have described. There are, of course, other Negro voters in the city—or rather men eligible to vote. There is, first, the native Philadelphian of Negro descent—member of an educated and well-to-do group of people. There are the better class of immigrants from the country districts of the state, Maryland, and Virginia. These men come into politics from a different angle. A large number of

them, especially of the better class of immigrants, neglect to vote—the campaign of contempt for civic duties and civic privileges has been preached to them assiduously. They have seen those of their number who preached political suicide for the Negro vociferously applauded and they have come to think it a virtue to neglect the exercise of the right of suffrage. Thus the result of the foolish campaign against the Negro in politics has been simply to drive out of political life the very class of Negroes needed most, and to deliver political life and activity into the hands of the political clubs and their ignorant or debased followers.

Then, too, the Negro voter even of the better class feels no civic pride. Philadelphia is not his city; it grants him nothing in particular save what he struggles for in sweat. It shows him no kindness unless he be a criminal or pauper, and under the political organization preceding the recent upheaval, it did not need his vote or seek it. The Negro feels in Philadelphia and in America few promptings of patriotism, and he looks upon all local questions from the standpoint of his social and individual interests. His greatest hardship is difficulty of employment; his characteristic, poverty. This is due to present and past conditions, *i. e.*, prejudice and lack of skill and application. Both these handicaps can be overcome, but it takes hard work. To such a class the direct or indirect bribery of money is a tremendous temptation. Direct distribution of money to Negro voters at the polls is therefore considerable, but this does not touch the upper half or third of the voting population. This part is influenced by the indirect methods of bribery. There are in the employ of the city to-day, approximately:

1 member of the common council.
 3 clerks in the city service
 10 or more messengers.
 65 policemen.
 30 school teachers.

These persons on the whole represent the better class of Negroes and with a few exceptions have given first-class service; but so far as the office-holders themselves are concerned these are the best jobs they could get; probably in no other way could these people get employment

that would give them half their present incomes. Their jobs are "in politics," and their holders must and do support the "machine." Moreover, such civic pride as the Negro has is naturally expended on these representatives of his race in public life and they support the party that puts these men in office. Thus office holding is both a direct and indirect bribe to the Negroes and to the better class of them.

*The Treatment
 of the
 Good-Government
 Negro.*

It happens, however, that the political hold of the "machine" in Philadelphia has been so great and far-reaching, their majorities so overwhelming, and the white citizens so supine in their bondage, that the "machine" cares little for the 25,000 Negro votes and has cut down their patronage lately in some respects; Negroes used to have three counsellors: now they have one, and Boss Durham before his fall said that this "would be the last one." "There are some Negroes in my division," said a ward politician, "and they've been coming to me and telling me what they want, but I tell 'em to go to hell. We don't need their votes." If on finding their support not sought or needed, perhaps the better class do not vote. This makes little difference for the ward bosses having the registration lists vote the names of all who do not appear at the polls. A colored man, headwaiter at a large hotel, went down to the polls; pretty soon he came back. "Did you vote?" he was asked. "No," he said, "I find that I had already voted—I'd like to know which way!"

Suppose now one of the better class of Negroes should determine to go into politics with a view to better conditions. Has this ever happened? Colonel McClure in his *Reminiscences* does not know of any case, but it has been pointed out to him since that he was mistaken. Men of Negro blood like Henry L. Philips, one of the most public-spirited of Philadelphia's citizens, white or black, and Walter P. Hall, a member of the present reform Committee of Seventy, have continually and repeatedly sided with reform movements. And others have, too. Yet it is true that no large mass of colored voters have followed reform movements hitherto. Nor is the reason for this far to seek.

Under the machine an honest man interested in politics had no place. A young friend of mine offered his services in his ward. "See the ward Boss" was the answer. And the ward Boss—"What do you want?" he said, and he meant: "Do you want protection to run a bawdy house, or to sell liquor without a license or to get somebody out of jail? And if so, are you willing in return to falsify voting lists, round up repeaters, etc." My friend saw nothing attractive in this career and he is consequently "out of politics." When now a reform movement like that of the Municipal League has come, it has invariably made the mistake of supposing that because there are few of the better class of Negroes in politics, there is no better class worth appealing to. Moreover, if a few of the leading Negroes were appealed to what could they say to the masses: could they promise that Negroes would be retained in civil service, or on the police force, or as teachers? No, the reformers were not promising jobs. But this matter was more than the question of a simple job—it was a question of economic opportunity. It was really the same question of earning a living that is the main motive in the political action of the whites. Why are Philadelphia politics dirty? Because the most influential and respected citizens of the town are using public business for private gain. White citizens find that franchises, concessions, and favorable administration furnish them the most money. Negroes, being barred from business, largely find the actual salaries of office not only the greatest attraction, but an actual matter of bread and butter. Thus the Negroes have always been suspicious that the reform movements tended not to their betterment but to their elimination from political life and consequently from the best chance of earning a living. And the attitude of some of the reformers and their contempt for Negroes has not improved this race opinion.

It might be asked,—Could not the better element of Negroes outvote the worse element and support an independent movement? This has been tried and the machine beat it. A few years ago a clean young colored lawyer, Harry W. Bass, revolted against the machine and ran for

the legislature. He made a good run in the seventh ward, receiving a large vote but not a majority. A little later he ran again and the machine was alarmed. Immediately they nominated another Negro of fairly respectable character on another independent ticket and finally nominated a white candidate on the regular ticket. The result of this three-cornered fight was that Bass received but 400 votes, the white machine candidate was elected, and the other "independent" candidate was given a political job at Harrisburg.

In the present latest upheaval the Negroes are represented on the Committee of Seventy by a business man, Walter P. Hall. In a few of the wards they have organized under the new city party of reform. In the great Negro ward, the seventh, there is one Negro member of the ward committee. While it is uncertain how far the Negro will support reform at present, yet it is certain that an influential part of the better class will co-operate and that there is a great opportunity to give 70,000 Negroes the best chance of education in politics that they have ever had.

*The Reconstruction
Situation
Repeated.*

What now is the wrong and right of this situation? It is manifestly this: If you wish democratic government to be successful you must strive to inculcate into the humblest citizen a conception of its duties and its rewards. There is no democratic government in Philadelphia, and has not been for a generation. There is an oligarchy of ward politicians and business men using public office for private gain. Into this system a new mass of untrained Negro voters were cast and they followed their leaders, as was perfectly natural. As a mass they went into politics for what they could get out of it and in this respect Lombard and Walnut streets joined hands and made common cause. We have an exact repetition here of the reconstruction difficulties in the South on a smaller scale. The brother thieves of the *Credit-Mobilier*, the Tweed ring, and the other northern tricksters, began the looting of the newly reconstructed southern states. They used the ignorant Negroes for their tools. The result was that the Negroes followed their leaders and stole and looted too. Yet

this experience is put into history as a classic example of the unfitness of Negroes to exercise political power. Philadelphia needs to go back to the very a b c of government—to teach its citizens,

white or black, the duties and rewards of good citizenship, to open its civil service on equal terms to all and to show the 25,000 Negro voters what government means.