

III.

HOW I CAME TO CALL THE FIRST NEGRO
CONFERENCE.

SOON after the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was opened, it was impressed upon my mind in several ways that a great deal of good could be accomplished by starting some movement which would interest the older people to the extent of putting them to work for their own elevation in a way that had not been started before.

This was first called to my attention by noticing on more than one occasion the unusual amount of common-sense displayed by what is termed the ignorant colored man of the South. Just here I would remark that it will interest any one who chooses to make a comparison; that he will find that the uneducated black man in the South, especially the one living in the country district, has more natural sense than the uneducated ignorant class of almost any other race. It was this that led me to the conclusion that any people who could see so clearly into their own condition and describe their own condition so vividly as was and is true with the common farming class of colored people in the South, could be led to do a great deal towards their own elevation. This caused me to call what is now known as the Tuskegee Negro Conference.

At first, I sent invitations to about 75 farmers, mechanics, school teachers and ministers to come and spend

a day at Tuskegee, talking over their condition and needs. I was very careful to tell all who were invited that I did not want them to come prepared with any address or cut-and-dried speech. I very often find that when the average man is asked to prepare an address, too much time is spent in giving attention to rhetoric, and little sense is put into the address; so I was very careful to impress upon all who were invited, that we wanted no formal address, but wanted them to come and talk about the conditions and needs very much in the same way as they would do around their own fire-sides.

To my surprise, there came to this first conference 400 men and women of all grades and conditions. Of course, the bulk of people were farmers, mechanics and a very few scattering ministers and teachers. The morning of the first day was spent in having told in a plain and simple manner what the conditions were along industrial lines. We had each delegate, as far as he could, tell the number who owned their farms, the number who rented land, the number who lived in one-room log cabins, the number who mortgaged their crops, and we also asked as to the educational condition of the people. We had them tell whether or not they had a school house in their community, how long the school lasted, how much money was given towards its support, the kind of teachers, whether good or bad, whether or not the people made any attempt to extend the school term, after the time provided by the State fund had expired. We also gave attention to the moral and religious life of the people, having them state what kind of minister they had, whether he was in all respects satisfactory. Taking up the life of the teacher, we would have them give facts about their churches and Sunday schools.

We were surprised at the frankness and directness of the reports made by those who came to this first conference. In the afternoon we spent the time in hearing from these people as to what, in their opinion, would bring about remedies for the evils which existed and

this, by far, was the most gratifying part of the conference. It was satisfactory to see how those concerned saw into their own condition and suggested the needed remedies for the evils reported in the morning. It was found that in what was known as the "Black Belt" of the South at least four-fifths of the people in many counties were living on rented land, in small one-room cabins, and at least four-fifths mortgaged crops for food on which to live and were paying a rate of interest on these mortgages that ranged from 15 to 40 per cent. per annum. The schools in most cases extended but three months and were taught, as a rule, in the churches or broken down log cabins or under a bush arbor.

Many of the reports showed that the majority of the ministers were moral and upright. When we were discussing remedies, there seemed to be a universal agreement that the thing that was most needed was intelligent, unselfish ministers and teachers who would live among the people and teach them how to improve their industrial, educational and religious condition. I remember that during the discussion one man said that the Negro had too many Sundays, that while the white man only had one, the Negro had two, meaning that he kept Saturday and Sunday. In a number of such remarks illustrations were given showing how the Negro could improve his present condition.

It may prove interesting to give the declarations adopted by the first Tuskegee Negro Conference:

1. The seriousness of our condition lies in that, in the States where the colored people are most numerous, at least 90 per cent of them are in the country, they are difficult to reach, and but little is being done for them. Their industrial, educational and moral condition is slowly improving, but among the masses there is still a great amount of poverty and ignorance and much need of moral and religious training.

2. We urge all to buy land and to cultivate it thoroughly; to raise more food supplies; to build houses with more than one room; to tax themselves to build better school houses, and to extend the school term to at least six months; to give more attention to the character of our leaders, especially ministers and teachers; to keep out of debt; to avoid lawsuits; to treat our women better; and that conferences similar in aim to this one be held in every community where practicable.

3. More can be accomplished by going forward than by complaining.

With all our advantages, nowhere is there afforded us such business opportunities as are afforded in the South.

We would discourage the emigration agent. Self-respect will bring us many rights now denied us. Crime among us decreases as property increases.

From the first we have insisted that these conferences were to be confined, in discussion, to matters which the people themselves had in their power to remedy, rather than to matters which the nation, as a whole, or the entire race could remedy. In thus confining the scope of the conference it has not been our intention in these discussions to take up all that was vital to the Negro race. We have appreciated the fact that other organizations could better discuss outrages perpetrated upon the race, the political rights of the race, etc. We have also insisted from the beginning that these conferences must be simple in their organization; that there must be almost no machinery, few officers, and a very short constitution. In fact, I don't think that during the eight years these conferences have been held, we have spent more than forty minutes in electing officers. There is no constitution for the government of these conferences; the only constitution is common-sense, and the thing which we have insisted upon in these conferences is that the rank and file of the people themselves must be permitted to do the talking. I have never permitted any one to lecture at these conferences, as during the days of slavery the Negroes were not permitted to come together, touch elbows and get ideas and inspiration from each other; and the matter of laying plans for the future was almost unknown to them. These conferences seem to give them the opportunity that they most desire and they make the most of it.

One of the most interesting features of these conferences is to hear a man get up and tell how four or five years ago he used to mortgage his crop and how he has gotten out of debt, in a plain and simple manner. Such lessons are listened to attentively by the remaining portion of the conference and are more inspiring than any

lecture could be from some one who is far from the ranks of the mass of people.

The second conference was attended by some 800 persons, representing almost every section of the South. The attendance has increased each year until now we have from 2,000 to 3,000 delegates. I think that the most interesting thing in our last conference was when we gave the people an opportunity to tell in what way these conferences were beneficial to the masses of people. One man said that in his community before these conferences began only two persons owned land, but since the organization there are fourteen persons who own land; few live in one-room cabins, and very few mortgage their crops. He said that they had not only built a school-house, but had extended the school term from three to six months.

It is a very common thing to hear these men remark that they have long since gotten to the place where no man who is not morally upright can be a preacher or teacher in their community. These few facts indicate the importance of having the right kind of men among the rank and file of the people.

The day following what is known as the Negro Conference we have what is known as the Workers' Conference, which is composed of teachers in the institutions in the South for higher education for the Negro. This conference was called because many lessons can be gleaned from the Negro Conference which ought to be discussed and put into practice by those who compose the Workers' Conference. This latter conference is attended every year by the oldest and some of the most important workers among the colored people in the South. The larger institutions are well represented. It all illustrates the growth which is gradually taking place. The last Workers' Conference was spent in discussing the relation existing between the white man and the black man in the South. This meeting was held in the heart of that section, and the discussions were very liberal and most helpful.

We have had during the eight years of these conferences, some very important and prominent visitors.

In his visit to Tuskegee and in speaking of these conferences, President McKinley said:

"One thing I like about this institution is that its policy has been generous and progressive; it has not been so self-centered or interested in its own pursuits and ambitions as to ignore what is going on in the rest of the country, or make it difficult for outsiders to share the local advantages. I allude especially to the spirit in which the annual conferences have been held by the leading colored citizens and educators, with the intention of improving the condition of their less fortunate brothers and sisters. Here we can see an immense field and one which cannot too soon or too carefully be utilized. The conferences have grown in popularity, and are well calculated not only to encourage colored men and colored women in their individual efforts, but to cultivate and promote an amicable relationship between the two races—a problem whose solution was never more needed than at the present time."

Out of this central conference at Tuskegee has grown a large number of local conferences which are organized in the various counties and which meet monthly for the improvement of the people from industrial, religious and moral standpoints. The most important meeting of a similar character is one in the State of Texas under the leadership of Hon. R. L. Smith. This movement in Texas, embracing very much the same idea as the one started at Tuskegee, is growing in its scope and importance each year, and one of the most interesting and valuable features of Tuskegee conferences is the report which Mr. Smith makes of the growth and spread of his work in Texas.

Aside from the direct benefit which the Negro is receiving from these conferences, it is very plain that they are having indirect influence in bringing about more satisfactory relations between the black man and the white man. A movement of any kind which assists in

uplifting the Negro will receive the hearty support of the best class of white people of the South who are fast learning that they cannot go much higher than they can carry the Negro with them.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON.



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Title: The A.M.E. church review

ArticleTitle: How I Came to Call The First Negro Conference

ArticleAuthor: Booker T. Washington

Vol: 15 Date: April 1899 Pages: 802-8

OCLC - 457059; ISSN - 03603725;

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