

The Raleigh Freedmen's Convention

Address of the Freedmen's Convention to the White and Colored citizens of North Carolina. From *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh, on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 1866* (Raleigh, 1866), pp. 26–27.

As you read...

In the months after the end of the war, African Americans held meetings throughout eastern North Carolina to discuss issues important to the former slaves. At such a meeting in New Bern, it was decided that a statewide convention should be held. Delegates were chosen and representatives met in Raleigh, September 29–October 3. In attendance were 106 men from thirty-four of the state's eighty-nine counties. A decision was made to make it an open convention since all members did not have credentials. According to the proceedings, some "had as much as they could do to bring themselves, having to escape from their homes stealthily by night, and walked long distances, so as to avoid observation, such was the opposition manifested to the movement in some localities." Analysis of the group shows that a high percentage were the "black elite," literate property owners, many of them ministers.

James Walker Hood of New Bern was elected president. Hood stressed that "equal rights before the law" should be the convention's watchwords. The delegates pressed for rights to testify in court, to serve as jurors, to act as counsel, and to vote. "These are the rights we will contend for, these the rights we will have, God being our helper," Hood concluded to applause.

From North Carolina Historical Markers Program (see <http://www.ncmarkers.com/Markers.aspx?ct=ddl&sp=search&k=Markers&sv=H-109%20-%20FREEDMEN'S%20CONVENTION>)

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What historical documents did the authors of this address reference in their declaration?
2. Why do you think they chose to use these documents in writing this address?
3. What did the men at the delegation want? How did they justify their demands?
4. Why did African Americans need the protection and co-operation of white men in North Carolina?

FELLOW-CITIZENS:—

We, the colored People of North-Carolina, in Convention assembled at Raleigh, on the 2nd, 3d, 4th and 5th days of Oct. 1866, viewing the complex condition of affairs and of public sentiment in our State, deem it our duty to present to you our grievances, our sufferings and the outrages heaped upon us, because of our helpless and disqualified position for self-defence, resulting, as we think we can prove, from no greater cause than our long and unjust political disfranchisement.

We ask you, in the spirit of meekness, is taxation without representation just? History and conscience answer no!

We do not come to you in a spirit of reproach or denunciation, neither do we feel in pleading for equal rights without regard to complexional differences, that we are in the least degree selfish. Nor do we in any respect seek to lower the standard of refinement, intelligence or honor among the great and loyal people of the commonwealth of North-Carolina, by urging these questions upon your consideration at this time. We would view if possible the brightest side of the picture, which we have to present, and give to our beloved State all the honor and credit deserved for the rapid strides which this great Nation has been taking in the direction of universal emancipation and equality before the law.

You will acquiesce when we say that we can boast a little of our loyalty to the general government, in the bloody struggle through which we have just passed. Our fathers fought shoulder to shoulder with the white man in the Revolutionary war, and in the war of 1812. They did their duty and did it well. In the one just ended, our fathers, brothers and sons bared their breasts to the fiery storm to save the Union.

FELLOW-CITIZENS: You have taught us one good thing, which we cannot forget. It is this: "That all men are born free and equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," &c.

FELLOW-CITIZENS:— Can we look to you for protection or not, to shield us from the murderous hand? Oh, humanity, where is thy blush? Our defenceless wives and children, fathers, sons and brothers are beaten with clubs, robbed, shot and killed, in various localities, and the authorities regard it not. We beg you as white men in authority to shield our defenceless heads, and guard our little homes. We appeal to your religion and humanity. We claim by merit the right of suffrage, and ask it at your hands. We believe the day has come, when black men have rights which white men are bound to respect. We intend to live and die on the soil which gave us birth. Oh, North-Carolina, the land of our birth, with all thy faults we love thee still. Will you, oh! will you treat us as human beings, with all our rights? It is all we ask.

Your humble servants, in behalf of the State's Equal Rights League,

GEO. A. RUE, Chairman.

J. T. SCHENCK, H. LOCKET, J. A. SYKES.

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