



The Niagara Movement: Our History, My History

By Darchelle M. Garner



Robert H. Bonner

The Niagara Movement Annual Meeting, Boston, 1907. My great-grandfather, Robert H. Bonner, is in the second row, far right, next to W.E.B. Du Bois.

The Niagara Movement eventually included women. My great-grandfather is in the second row from top, fourth from left.

For three years, my parents and I repeatedly planned and then canceled (for various reasons) our inaugural visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Then, late last year, we finally made it there. Excited as I was for this long-anticipated adventure, my mother was ecstatic. That was understandably so, since she expected that photos of her grandfather and the story of his activism would be displayed somewhere in the Museum.

Upon our arrival, we proceeded straight to the information desk to ask about such a display, and after an elevator ride and a brief walk through an exhibition hallway, we arrived at the exhibit we most wished to see: the Niagara Movement.

The Niagara Movement was launched in 1905 by a group of prominent African American intellectuals, led by W.E.B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter. When the group was not allowed to meet in the hotels in Buffalo, New York, they crossed to the other side of Niagara Falls into Fort Erie, Ontario, where they held their first meeting. There the twenty-nine African American men, including my great-grandfather, Robert H. Bonner, met in secret to establish the Niagara Movement. They created a manifesto that demanded full political, civil and social rights for Black Americans and the end of segregation and all forms of racial discrimination in the United States. They advocated for economic and educational opportunity and for voting rights for both African American men *and* women.

We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, and we will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings, or simply for the use of other people. They have a right to know, to think, to aspire.

W.E.B. DuBois: Niagara Movement Speech

The group was motivated in great part by their strong opposition to the conciliatory activism of Booker T. Washington, who believed that, if African Americans worked hard and educated themselves, they would eventually attain equality with their white counterparts. This gradual approach to freedom, so-called accommodation philosophy, leveled on the oppressive white society neither responsibility for racism nor demands for justice and opportunity. The Niagara Movement sought immediate change for black people in America, and insisted that African Americans were inherently equal. In their Declaration of Principles, Dr. Du Bois and the members of the Niagara Movement stated, “We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro-American assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before insults.”

The Niagara Movement met annually until 1908. In August of that year, two white women were allegedly assaulted by black men in Springfield, the capital city of Illinois. Taking the law in their own hands, a mob of angry, vengeful whites attacked and destroyed the homes and businesses of African Americans throughout the community. Although many blacks defended themselves, ultimately, six were shot dead, two were lynched, and about 2,000 were driven out of Springfield. This event, the first such “riot” in northern states in decades – and in the home state of Abraham Lincoln – galvanized civil rights activists, both black and white, nationwide, and led to the creation in 1909 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Dr. Du Bois, along with many of the Niagara Movement membership, were founding members of the NAACP. With full focus on this new organization, the Niagara Movement officially disbanded the following year in 1910.

Needless to say, my mother was thrilled that day to see the photographs of her grandfather displayed in the Museum, grateful that the Niagara Movement was afforded the recognition it rightfully deserves. So was I. This history – our history, my history – cannot be minimized. In its short lifetime, the Niagara Movement established the foundation from which the NAACP – and other influential civil rights organizations – subsequently launched and won countless battles that, over the last 100+ years, substantially changed this nation for the better. The Niagara Movement cast a vision for a just society with equal opportunity for African Americans and all people.

In the words of the Niagara Movement from its “Address to the Country,” delivered in 1906:

“Courage brothers! The battle for humanity is not lost or losing. All across the skies sit signs of promise. The Slav is raising in his might, the yellow millions are tasting liberty, the black Africans are writhing toward the light, and everywhere the laborer, with ballot in his hand, is voting open the gates of Opportunity and Peace. The morning breaks over blood-stained hills. We must not falter, we may not shrink. Above are the everlasting stars.”

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica; BlackPast.org; VCU Libraries; socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu

THE NIAGARA MOVEMENT's DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES, 1905

Progress: The members of the conference, known as the Niagara Movement, assembled in annual meeting at Buffalo, July 11th, 1905, congratulate the Negro-Americans on certain undoubted evidences of progress in the last decade, particularly the increase of intelligence, the buying of property, the checking of crime, the uplift in home life, the advance in literature and art, and the demonstration of constructive and executive ability in the conduct of great religious, economic, and educational institutions.

Suffrage: At the same time, we believe that this class of American citizens should protest emphatically and continually against the curtailment of their political rights. We believe in manhood suffrage; we believe that no man is so good, intelligent or wealthy as to be entrusted wholly with the welfare of his neighbor.

Civil Liberty: We believe also in protest against the curtailment of our civil rights. All American citizens have the right to equal treatment in places of public entertainment according to their behavior and deserts.

Economic Opportunity: We especially complain against the denial of equal opportunities to us in economic life; in the rural districts of the South this amounts to peonage and virtual slavery; all over the South it tends to crush labor and small business enterprises; and everywhere American prejudice, helped often by iniquitous laws, is making it more difficult for Negro-Americans to earn a decent living.

Education: Common school education should be free to all American children and compulsory. High school training should be adequately provided for all, and college training should be the monopoly of no class or race in any section of our common country. We believe that, in defense of our own institutions, the United States should aid common school education, particularly in the South, and we especially recommend concerted agitation to this end. We urge an increase in public high school facilities in the South, where the Negro-Americans are almost wholly without such provisions. We favor well-equipped trade and technical schools for the training of artisans, and the need of adequate and liberal endowment for a few institutions of higher education must be patent to sincere well-wishers of the race.

Courts: We demand upright judges in courts, juries selected without discrimination on account of color and the same measure of punishment and the same efforts at reformation for black as for white offenders. We need orphanages and farm schools for dependent children, juvenile reformatories for delinquents, and the abolition of the dehumanizing convict-lease system.

Public Opinion: We note with alarm the evident retrogression in this land of sound public opinion on the subject of manhood rights, republican government and human brotherhood, and we pray God that this nation will not degenerate into a mob of boasters and oppressors, but rather will return to the faith of the fathers, that all men were created free and equal, with certain unalienable rights.

Health: We plead for health – for an opportunity to live in decent houses and localities, for a chance to rear our children in physical and moral cleanliness.

Employers and Labor Unions: We hold up for public execration the conduct of two opposite classes of men: The practice among employers of importing ignorant Negro-Americans laborers in emergencies, and then affording them neither protection nor permanent employment, and the practice of labor unions in proscribing and boycotting and oppressing thousands of their fellow-toilers, simply because they are black. These methods have accentuated and will accentuate the war of labor and capital, and they are disgraceful to both sides.

Protest: We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro-American assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before insults. Through helplessness we may submit, but the voice of protest of ten million Americans must never cease to assail the ears of their follows, so long as America is unjust.

Color-Line: Any discrimination based simply on race or color is barbarous, we care not how hallowed it be by custom expediency or prejudice. Differences made on account of ignorance, immorality, or disease are legitimate methods of fighting evil, and against them we have no word of protest, but discriminations based simply and solely on physical peculiarities, place of birth, color of skin, are relics of that unreasoning human savagery of which the world is and ought to be thoroughly ashamed.

“Jim Crow” Cars: We protest against the “Jim Crow” car, since its effect is and must be to make us pay first-class fare for third-class accommodations, render us open to insults and discomfort and to crucify wantonly our womanhood and self-respect.

Soldiers: We regret that his nation has never seen fit adequately to reward the black soldiers who, in its five wars, have defended their country with their blood, and yet have been systematically denied the promotions which their abilities deserve. And we regard as unjust, the exclusion of black boys from the military and naval training schools.

War Amendments: We urge upon Congress the enactment of appropriate legislation for securing the proper enforcement of those articles of freedom, the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments of the Constitution of the United States.

Oppression: We repudiate the monstrous doctrine that the oppressor should be the sole authority as to the rights of the oppressed. The Negro race in America stolen, ravished and degraded, struggling up through difficulties and oppression, needs sympathy and receives criticism: needs help and is given hindrance, needs protection and is given mob-violence, needs justice and is given charity, needs leadership and is given cowardice and apology, needs bread and is given a stone. This nation will never stand justified before God until these things are changed.

The Church: Especially are we surprised and astonished at the recent attitude of the church of Christ – of an increase of a desire to bow to racial prejudice, to narrow the bounds of human brotherhood, and to segregate black men to some outer sanctuary. This is wrong, unchristian and disgraceful to the twentieth century civilization.

Agitation: Of the above grievance we do not hesitate to complain, and to complain loudly and insistently. To ignore, overlook, or apologize for these wrongs is to prove ourselves unworthy of freedom. Persistent manly agitation is the way to liberty, and toward this goal the Niagara Movement has started and asks the cooperation of all men of all races.

Help: At the same time we want to acknowledge with deep thankfulness the help of our fellowmen from the Abolitionists down to those who today still stand for equal opportunity and who have given and still give of their wealth and of their poverty for our advancement.

Duties: And while we are demanding and ought to demand, and will continue to demand the rights enumerated above, God forbid that we should ever forget to urge corresponding duties upon our people:

1. The duty to vote.
2. The duty to respect the rights of others.
3. The duty to work.
4. The duty to obey the laws.
5. The duty to be clean and orderly.
6. The duty to send our children to school.
7. The duty to respect ourselves, even as we respect others.

This statement, complaint and prayer we submit to the American people, and Almighty God.

Source: math.buffalo.edu