PROCEEDINGS OF THE STATE CONVENTION OF COLORED PEOPLE, HELD AT ALBANY, NEW YORK (1851)

Even as Northern states abolished slavery in the decades following the Revolution and the abolition movement gained momentum, the legal status of free blacks remained uncertain and, in key instances, deteriorated. It was not just federal legislation, such as the Fugitive Slave Act. States and localities enacted restrictions on free Blacks and, in the process, made race (white or black) as important as status (slave or free). In response, Black men and women organized, gathering to strategize in meetings advertised as "Colored Conventions."

The attendees of this meeting in Albany, New York, were concerned about an array of restrictions at all levels of government: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; voting restrictions that had been written into New York's state constitution in 1821 and reaffirmed in 1846; and local measures that barred Black children from attending schools. They were also concerned about the American Colonization Society, which sought to resettle Black Americans in Africa. Once billed as a way to remove Black Americans from racism, colonization had fallen out of favor with Black activists, who saw it as accommodating the goals white supremacy: denying Black Americans claims to citizenship, forcing them from their own country, and leaving racial inequalities in place, instead of addressing them.

The debates at these conventions defined and shaped issues that ultimately found their way into the U.S. Constitution, through the Reconstruction Amendments, which granted the federal government the authority to address the kinds of restrictions at the state and local level that concerned these conference attendees.

Excerpt

We are exercising our assembly right to chart a path forward for the African American community. The paramount object of this Convention is, to assemble the disfranchised and aggrieved portion of the people of the State of New-York, to deliberate upon, and propose, then and there, the course to be pursued in the future and onward prosecution of our interests and rights.

The discrimination we face conflicts with the Declaration of Independence. And most solemnly are we impressed with this truth also, that the denial of our rights is the overthrow of the rock foundation principles of the country; for the Declaration of Independence, in the language of the late and lamented John Quincy Adams, recognizes no despotism, monarchial, aristocratic, or democratic, declares that individual man is possessed of rights which no government can deprive him.

We are concerned about a range of issues: the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the push to send African Americans back to Africa, and efforts to keep our children out of the schools. With this view and understanding, two great questions present themselves for adjustment, the first of which is the recent edict enacted and sent forth by Congress, called the "Fugitive Slave Law;" and the second in character is the coercive and barbarous Colonization Scheme; either of questions is characterized with infamy sufficient to libel christianity or sink a nation. There are other questions of local and State character that demand our immediate attention, viz: "the School-Questions;" a system of law of the State for the general education of all classes of children, without distinction or proscription. This philanthropic and far-seeing law has been suspended in its natural and defined course, and hundreds of children are thereby violently ejected from schools, and this in open violation of the law, and for no reason save that of God's giving them a different complexion from those in power.

We are also concerned about restrictions on African American voting rights. A second subject for consideration, but first in importance, is the "Suffrage Question." A special law of the State requires every colored voter to be in possession of two hundred and fifty dollars worth of real estate as a qualification. These local and general subjects require the people to act with promptness, union and energy, to effect the desire ends.

Their goals. NO PROSCRIPTION—NO SLAVES—UNION—FREEDOM AND EQUALITY !

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**