

THE Anglo-African Magazine.

VOL. I.

OCTOBER, 1859.

NO. 10.

The First Colored Convention.

On the fifteenth day of September, 1830, there was held at Bethel Church, in the city of Philadelphia, the first Convention of the colored people of these United States. It was an event of historical importance; and, whether we regard the times or the men of whom this assemblage was composed, we find matter for interesting and profitable consideration.

Emancipation had just taken place in New York, and had just been arrested in Virginia by the Nat Turner rebellion and Walker's pamphlet. Secret sessions of the legislatures of the several Southern States had been held to deliberate upon the production of a colored man who had coolly recommended to his fellow blacks the only solution to the slave question, which, after twenty-five years of arduous labor of the most hopeful and noble-hearted of the abolitionists,* seems the forlorn hope of freedom to-day—insurrection and bloodshed. Great Britain was in the midst of that bloodless revolution which, two years afterwards, culminated in the passage of the Reform Bill, and thus prepared the joyous and generous state of the British

heart which dictated the West India Emancipation Act. France was rejoicing in the not bloodless *trois jours de Juillet*. Indeed, the whole world seemed stirred up with a universal excitement, which, when contrasted with the universal panics of 1837 and 1857, leads one to regard as more than a philosophical speculation the doctrine of those who hold the life of mankind from the creation as but one life, beating with one heart, animated with one soul, tending to one destiny, although made up of millions upon millions of molecular lives, gifted with their infinite variety of attractions and repulsions, which regulate, or crystallize them into evanescent substructures or organizations, which we call nationalities and empires and peoples and tribes, whose minute actions and reactions on each other are the histories which absorb our attention, whilst the grand universal life moves on beyond our ken, or only guessed at, as the astronomers shadow out movements of our solar system around or towards some distant unknown centre of attraction.

If the times of 1830 were eventful, there were among our people, as well as among other peoples, men equal to the occasion. We had giants in those days! There were Bishop Allen, the founder of the great

* See letter of Hon. Gerrit Smith to Convention of Jerry Rescuers, dated Sept. 3, 1859.

Bethel connection of Methodists, combining in his person the fiery zeal of St. Francis Xavier with the skill and power of organizing of a Richelieu; the meek but equally efficient Rush (who yet remains with us in fulfilment of the scripture), the father of the Zion Methodists; Paul, whose splendid presence and stately eloquence in the pulpit, and whose grand baptisms in the waters of Boston Harbor, are a living tradition in all New England; the saintly and sainted Peter Williams, whose views of the best means of our elevation are in triumphant activity to-day; William Hamilton, the thinker and actor, whose sparse specimens of eloquence we will one day place in gilded frames as rare and beautiful specimens of Etruscan art—William Hamilton, who, four years afterwards, during the New York riots, when met in the street, loaded down with iron missiles, and asked where he was going, replied, "to die on my threshold!" Watkins, of Baltimore, Frederick Hinton, with his polished eloquence, James Forten, the merchant prince, * William Whipper, just essaying his youthful powers, Lewis Woodson and John Peck, of Pittsburgh, Austin Steward, then of Rochester, Samuel E. Cornish, who had the distinguished honor of reasoning Gerrit Smith out of colonizationism, and of telling Henry Clay that he would never be president of anything higher than the American Colonization Society, Philip A. Bell, the born *sabreur*, who never feared the face of clay, and a hundred others, were the worthily leading spirits among the colored people.

And yet the idea of the first colored Convention did not originate with any of these distinguished men: it came from a young man of Baltimore, then, and still,

* It is a profitable comparison of 1830 with 1859, to remember that up to 1834-5, Mr. James Forten, of Philadelphia, was held up as an extraordinary instance of a colored man's ability, and because he had amassed \$30,000 at his business.

unknown to fame. Born in that city in 1801, he was in 1817 apprenticed to a man some two hundred miles off in the South-east. Arriving at his field of labor, he worked hard nearly a week and received poor fare in return. One day while at work near the house, the mistress came out and gave him a furious scolding, so furious, indeed, that her husband mildly interfered; she drove the latter away, and threatened to take the Baltimore out of the lad with cow-hide, &c., &c.; at this moment, to use his own expression, the lad became *converted*, that is, he determined to be his own master as long as he lived. Early night-fall found him on his way to Baltimore, which he reached after a severe journey which tested his energy and ingenuity to the utmost. At the age of twenty-three he was engaged in the summer time in supplying Baltimore with ice from his cart, and in winter in cutting up pork for Ellicots' establishment. He must have been strong and swift with knife and cleaver, for in one day he cut up and dressed some four hundred and fifteen porkers.*

In 1824, our young friend fell in with Benjamin Lundy,† and in 1828-9, with

* In the year of grace 1855, professional duties threw the writer of this into an acquaintance with Rutherford, a lineal descendant of the Rutherford of the Scotch Reformation: he was engaged at a thousand dollars a year in "cutting up" for a pork establishment in New York city: he was a splendid fellow (physically) of five-and-twenty, and a magnificent Greek scholar; it was a strange enchantment, to sit in the airy loft over-looking the Hudson, and hear him, cleaver in hand, recite and criticize the glowing lines of Homer Pindar and Anacreon!

† Mr. Goodell, in his "Slavery and Anti-Slavery in the United States," page 395, states that Benjamin Lundy started his first anti-slavery paper in Baltimore. This is not correct. Shortly after the discussion on the Missouri Compromise, a Mr. Lambert, residing in Tennessee, published the "EMANCIPATOR," in that State, a thorough-going anti-slavery journal, which gave the best account extant of the insurrection in Charleston in 1822.

Wm. Lloyd Garrison, editors and publishers of the "Genius of Universal Emancipation;" a radical anti-slavery paper—whose boldness would put the "National Era" to shame—printed and published in the slave State of Maryland. In 1829–30, the colored people of the free States were much excited on the subject of emigration: there had been an emigration to Hayti, and also to Canada, and some had been driven to Liberia by the severe laws and brutal conduct of the fermenters of colonization in Virginia and Maryland. In some districts of these States, the disguised whites would enter the houses of free colored men at night, and take them out and give them from thirty to fifty lashes, to get them to consent to go to Liberia.

It was in the spring of 1830, that the young man we have sketched, HEZEKIAH GRICE, conceived the plan of calling together a meeting or convention of colored men, in some place north of the Potomac, for the purpose of comparing views and of adopting a harmonious movement either of emigration, or of determination to remain in the United States; convinced of the hopelessness of contending against the oppressions in the United States, living in the very depth of that oppression and wrong, his own views looked to Canada; but he held them subject to the decision of the majority of the convention which might assemble.

On the 2nd of April, 1830, he addressed a written circular to prominent colored men in the free States, requesting their opinions on the necessity and propriety of

Mr. Lundy was, at that time, a saddler, working at his bench, in the same place where this paper was published; he became deeply interested in the cause and soon associated himself with Mr. Lambert. The latter died before his journal had completed its first year, and his mantle fell upon the shoulders of Benjamin Lundy, and there "found nothing less pure, less noble, or less energetic than itself."

holding such convention, and stated that if the opinions of a sufficient number warranted it, he would give notice of the time and place at which duly elected delegates might assemble. Four months passed away, and his spirit almost died within him, for he had received not a line from any one in reply. When he visited Mr. Garrison in his office, and stated his project, Mr. Garrison took up a copy of Walker's Appeal, and said, although it might be right, yet it was too early to have published such a book.

On the 11th of August, however, he received a sudden and peremptory order from Bishop Allen, to come instantly to Philadelphia, about the emigration matter. He went, and found a meeting assembled to consider the conflicting reports on Canada of Messrs. Lewis and Dutton; at a subsequent meeting held the next night, and near the adjournment, the Bishop called Mr. Grice aside, and gave him to read a printed circular, issued from New York city, strongly approving of Mr. Grice's plan of a convention, and signed by Peter Williams, Peter Vogelsang and Thomas L. Jennings. The Bishop added, "my dear child, we must take some action immediately, *or else these New Yorkers will get ahead of us.*" The Bishop left the meeting to attend a lecture on chemistry by Dr. Wells,* of Baltimore. Mr. Grice introduced the subject of the convention; and a committee consisting of Bishop Allen, Benjamin Pascal, Cyrus Black, James Cornish, and Junius C. Morel, were appointed to lay the matter before the colored people of Philadelphia. This committee, led, doubtless, by Bishop Allen, at once issued a call for a convention of the colored men of the United States, to be held in the city of Philadelphia on the 15th September, 1830.

* A black man of talent, who was instructed in medicine at a medical college in Baltimore, on condition that he would go to Africa.

Mr. Grice returned to Baltimore rejoicing at the success of his project; but, in the same boat which bore him down the Chesapeake, he was accosted by Mr. Zollickoffer, a member of the Society of Friends, a Philadelphian, and a warm and tried friend of the blacks. Mr. Zollickoffer used arguments and even entreaties, to dissuade Mr. Grice from holding the Convention, pointing out the dangers and difficulties of the same should it succeed, and the deep injury it would do the cause in case of failure. Of course it was reason and entreaty thrown away.

On the fifteenth of September, Mr. Grice again landed in Philadelphia, and in the fulness of his expectation asked every colored man he met about the Convention; no one knew anything about it; the first man did not know the meaning of the word, and another man said, "who ever heard of colored people holding a convention—convention, indeed!" Finally, reaching the place of meeting, he found, in solemn conclave, the five gentlemen who had called the Convention, and who had constituted themselves delegates: with a warm welcome from Bishop Allen, Mr. Grice, who came with credentials from the people of Baltimore, was admitted as delegate. A little while after, Dr. Burton, of Philadelphia, dropped in, and demanded by what right the six gentlemen held their seats as members of the Convention. On a hint from Bishop Allen, Mr. Pascal moved that Dr. Burton be elected an honorary member of the Convention, which softened the Doctor. In half an hour, five or six tall, grave, stern-looking men, members of the Zion Methodist body in Philadelphia, entered, and demanded by what right the members present held their seats and undertook to represent the colored people. Another hint from the Bishop and it was moved that these gentlemen be elected honorary members. But the gentlemen would submit to no such thing, and would accept

nothing short of full membership, which was granted them.

Among the delegates were Abraham Shadd, of Delaware, J. W. C. Pennington, of Brooklyn, Austin Steward, of Rochester, Horace Easton, of Boston, and — Adams, of Utica.

The main subject of discussion was emigration to Canada; Junius C. Morel, Chairman of a committee on that subject, presented a report, on which there was a two days' discussion; the point discussed was, that the report stated that "the lands in Canada were *synonymous* with those of the Northern States." The word *synonymous* was objected to, and the word similar proposed in its stead. Mr. Morel, with great vigor and ingenuity, defended the report, but was finally voted down, and the word *similar* adopted. The Convention recommended emigration to Canada, passed strong resolutions against the American Colonization Society, and at its adjournment appointed the next annual Convention of the people of color to be held in Philadelphia, on the first Monday in June, 1831.

At the present day, when colored conventions are almost as frequent as church-meetings, it is difficult to estimate the bold and daring spirit which inaugurated the Colored Convention of 1830. It was the right move, originating in the right quarter and at the right time. Glorious old Maryland, or, as one speaking in the view that climate grows the men, would say, Maryland—Virginia region, which has produced Benjamin Banneker, Nat. Turner, Frederick Douglass, the parents of Ira Aldridge, Henry Highland Garnett, and Sam. Ringold Ward,* also produced the founder of colored conventions, Hezekiah Grice!

* All the black men yet mentioned in Appleton's new Encyclopedia—Aldridge, Banneker and Frederick Douglass—were either natives or immediate descendants of this *regio in terris*.

At that time, in the prime of his young manhood, he must have presented the front of one equal to any fortune, able to achieve any undertaking. Standing six feet high, well-proportioned, of a dark bronze complexion, broad brow, and that stamp of features out of which the Greek sculptor would have delighted to mould the face of Vulcan—he was, to the fullest extent, a working man of such sort and magnetism as would lead his fellows where he listed.

In looking to the important results that grew out of this Convention, the independence of thought and self-assertion of the black man are the most remarkable. Then the union of purpose and union of strength which grew out of the acquaintanceship and mutual pledges of colored men from the different States. Then the subsequent conventions, where the great men we have already named, and others, appeared and took part in the discussions with manifestations of zeal, talent and ability, which attracted Garrison, the Tappans, Jocelyn, and others of that noble host, who, drawing no small portion of their inspiration from their black brethren in bonds, did manfully fight in the days of anti-slavery which tried men's souls, and when, to be an abolitionist, was, to a large extent, to be a martyr.

We cannot help adding the thought, that had these conventions of the colored people of the United States continued their annual sittings from 1830 until the present time, the result would doubtless have been greater general progress among our people themselves, a more united front to meet past and coming exigencies, and a profounder hold upon the public attention, and a deeper respect on the part of our enemies than we now can boast of. Looking at public opinion as it is, the living law of the land, and yet a malleable, ductile entity, which can be moulded, or, at least, affected, by the thoughts of any masses vocally expressed, we should have become

a power on earth, of greater strength and influence than in our present scattered and dwindled state we dare even dream of. The very announcement "Thirtieth Annual Convention of the Colored People of the United States," would bear a majestic front. Our great gathering at Rochester in 1853, commanded not only public attention but respect and admiration. Should we have such a gathering even now, once a year, not encumbered with elaborate plans of action, with too many wheels within wheels, we can yet regain much of the ground lost. The partial gathering at Boston, the other day, has already assumed its place in the public mind, and won its way into the calculations of the politicians.

Our readers will doubtless be glad to learn the subsequent history of Mr. Grice. He did not attend the second Convention, but, in the interval between the second and third, he formed, in the city of Baltimore, a "LEGAL RIGHTS ASSOCIATION," for the purpose of ascertaining the legal status of the colored man in the United States. It was entirely composed of colored men, among whom were Mr. Watkins (the colored Baltimorean), Mr. Deaver, and others. Mr. Grice called on William Wirt, and asked him "what he charged for his opinion on a given subject?" "Fifty dollars." "Then, sir, I will give you fifty dollars if you will give me your opinion on the legal condition of a free colored man in these United States."

Mr. Wirt required the questions to be written out in proper form before he could answer them. Mr. Grice employed Tyson, who drew up a series of questions, based upon the Constitution of the United States, and relating to the rights and citizenship of the free black. He carried the questions to Mr. Wirt, who, glancing over them, said, "really, sir, my position as an officer under the government renders it a delicate matter for me to answer these questions as they should be answered, but I'll tell you

what to do: they should be answered, and by the best legal talent of the land; do you go to Philadelphia, and present my name to Horace Binney, and he will give you an answer satisfactory to you, and which will command the greatest respect throughout the land." Mr. Grice went to Philadelphia, and presented the questions and request to Horace Binney. This gentleman pleaded age and poor eye-sight, but told Mr. Grice that if he would call on John Sargent, he would get answers of requisite character and weight. He called on John Sargent, who promptly agreed to answer the questions if Mr. Binney would allow his name to be associated as an authority in the replies. Mr. Binney again declined, and so the matter fell through. This is what Mr. Grice terms his "*Dred Scott case*"—and so it was.

He attended the Convention of 1832, but by some informality, or a want of credentials, was not permitted to sit as a full member!—Saul ejected from among the prophets!—Yet he was heard on the subject of rights, and the doctrine of "our rights," as well as the first colored convention, are due to the same man.

In 1832, chagrined at the colored people of the United States, he migrated to Hayti, where, until 1843, he pursued the business of carver and gilder. In the latter year he was appointed Director of Public Works in Port-au-Prince, which office he held until two years ago. He is also engaged in, and has wide knowledge of, machinery and engineering. Every two or three years he visits New York, and is welcomed to the arcana of such men as James J. Mapes, the Bensons, Dunhams, and at the various works, where steam and iron obey human ingenuity in our city. He is at present in this city, lodg-

ing at the house of the widow of his old friend and coadjutor Thomas L. Jinnings, 133 Reade street. We have availed ourselves of his presence among us to glean from him the statements which we have imperfectly put together in this article.

We cannot dismiss this subject without the remark, of peculiar pertinence at this moment, that it would have been better for our people had Mr. Grice never left these United States. The twenty-seven years he has passed in Hayti, although not without their mark on the fortunes of that island, are yet without such mark as he would have made in the land and upon the institutions among which he was born. So early as his thirty-second year, before he had reached his intellectual prime, he had inaugurated two of the leading ideas on which our people have since acted, conventions to consider and alleviate their grievances, and the struggle for legal rights. If he did such things in early youth, what might he not have done with the full force and bent of his matured intellect? And where, in the wide world, in what region, or under what sun, could he so effectually have labored to elevate the black man, as on this soil and under American institutions?

So profoundly are we opposed to the favorite doctrine of the Puritans and their co-workers, the colonizationists—*Ubi Libertas, ibi Patria*—that we could almost beseech Divine Providence to reverse some past events, and to fling back into the heart of Virginia and Maryland their Sam. Wards, Highland Garnets, J. W. Penningtons, Frederick Douglasses, and the twenty thousand who now shout hosannas in Canada—and we would soon see some stirring in the direction of *Ubi Patria, ibi Libertas*!