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WILLIAM L. BULKLEY AND THE NEW YORK NEGRO, 1890-1910

By

George Psychas

Born into slavery in South Carolina in 1861, William Lewis Bulkley became a pupil in a log cabin school in Greenville, South Carolina.[1] In 1882 he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. William Bulkley was said to have struggled to achieve his education and worked as a janitor, waiter and cook while studying at Claflin.[2] Later he moved North and worked at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and continued his studies in France and Germany. Completing work for a Master's degree, he earned a Doctorate of Philosophy from Syracuse University in 1893, with Latin as his major field.[3]

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[1] Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (New York, 1965), p. 63.

[2] Robert Dixon, "Education of the Negro in the City of New York: 1853-1900" (unpublished master's thesis, College of the City of New York, 1935), p. 52.

[3] Harry Washington Green, Holders of Doctorates Among American Negroes (Boston, 1946), p. 107.

Bulkley became principal of Public School 80, in New York City, in 1889, just nine years after he began teaching in the city. Later, in 1909, he was made principal of a predominantly white school, Public School 125.[4]

As early as 1884 the public schools of New York absorbed the "separate schools," and in that year the three remaining "colored schools" were integrated by virtue of a bill signed by Governor Grover Cleveland providing that they be opened without regard to race or color.[5] Still, when Bulkley was appointed principal, the teachers of Public School 125 protested and petitioned the Board of Education to withdraw the appointment.[6] To his credit the Superintendent of Schools, a Mr. Jasper, replied that he looked only for "efficiency and merit" in a teacher. He further threatened to discharge any teacher who manifested disrespect toward the Negro principal.[7]

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[4]Ralph Ellison, "William Lewis Bulkley" (WPA research paper, Schomburg Collection), p. 1.

[5]Dixon, "Education of the Negro."

[6]Seth M. Scheiner, _Negro Mecca: A History of the Negro in New York City, 1865-1920_ (New York, 1965), p. 177.

[7]_Ibid._, pp. 177-78.

The state legislature of New York further eliminated racial discrimination in the schools when it abolished segregated schools throughout the state in 1900.[8] Despite the gains Negroes achieved in the schools, and others in the courts, the transportation facilities and the public places of New York City, the Negro teacher suffered many violations of his rights.[9] For example, as late as 1906 when a Negro teacher was appointed to Public School 11, a school which may well have had one fourth or more of its students as Negroes, the teachers of that school protested the appointment and petitioned the Board of Education. The Board felt obligated to review the case, and decided to transfer the teacher to a predominantly Negro school, not because she was morally objectionable or incompetent, but because she was colored.[10]

There was little to be proud of in the eyes of a Negro youth during this period. The appointment of Dr. Bulkley to an all-white school might have aroused a sense of pride among the Negro community's youth, yet even that

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[8] Ibid., p. 179.

[9] Ibid.

[10] New York Age, April 5, 1906.

appears to have been a loss of sorts. The appointment removed a compassionate teacher, a man to be respected and admired by Negro youth, and placed him in a white district.

William Lewis Bulkley wrote a detailed analysis, "The Industrial Condition of the Negro in New York City," published in the _Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science_ in June of 1906. He saw the Negro population of New York State increasing three hundred per cent during the nineteenth century, from 31,310 to 99,232, with the City of New York receiving the greatest share, an increase which nearly doubled in twenty years.[12] In 1906, New York City had a larger Negro population than any other Northern city, and it stood fourth in the list of all American cities.[13] While the reasons for the influx have been discussed in great detail by many others, Dr. Bulkley specified only the intolerable civil, social, and political conditions which existed in various parts of the South. He was not particularly interested in the other reasons for the

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[11]Bulkley, _loc. cit._

[12]_Ibid._

[13]_Ibid._

migration.

Being a practical man who sought specific solutions to specific problems, he put forth in his article four questions and proceeded to answer them. His answers to these questions provide insight to his views on how to educate and organize the Negro in order to allow him to achieve better status in the social order of New York City. Bulkley asked:

1. Is the Afro-American possessed of the necessary qualifications to hold his own in the strenuous industrial and economic conflicts of a city like New York?

2. Are his opportunities for employment conductive to the development of the best of which he is capable?

3. What kinds of employment are open to him?

4. Is prejudice increasing or diminishing?

Basically, Bulkley was asking if there was hope that the Negro could overcome the conflicts of an urban economy. He was posing the question of the possibility of the Negro's finding a satisfactory place among the craftsmen in the various lines of industrial endeavor in a city such as New York. In his answer, Bulkley gave rather eloquent proof that Negroes could and did possess the ability to build an economy, for it had been their labor which developed

the South. Again he wrote: "One would remember that for two centuries almost all the labor of the South, both skilled and unskilled, was by the men of African lineage."

The answer to the question about finding opportunities for challenging employment was a pitifully and shameful "No." Although many unions in New York were open unions and officially did not exercise a color bar, in 1906 Bulkley reported that in the last census there had been only 4,419 Negro men and 1,401 Negro women engaged in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits out of a total of 99,323 in the state. He stated that even these persons probably were not regularly employed and that an investigation of union trade rosters would reveal only a minority of them as union members. These figures seem incredibly low for a city as industrialized as New York, even for the year 1906. Employment opportunities were not available to the Negro laborer and certainly could not be described as "conductive to the development of the best of which he is capable."

The answers Dr. Bulkley offered to the question of the kinds of employment open to the Negro contain the foundations of his thoughts about how to get the Negro

out of the menial service and into meaningful, gainful employment. He cited rather impressive statistics to support his concern that the Negro did not benefit from his training in school. Using the 1900 census for the State of New York, he proved that Negroes were either unemployed or working as domestics:

Numbers of Negro persons		
Those over 10 years of age		57,000
Those in professional services	1,342	
Those in trade and transportation	1,021	
Those in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits	5,800	
Therefore, those in service of a menial nature		49,000
Those in total state population	99,000	
Those reported at work	57,000	
Therefore, those not employed		42,000
Those not employed - under school age	7,000	
Those not employed - in school	12,000	
Those not employed - mothers at home	10,000	
Therefore, those idle or unable to work for physical reasons		13,000[14]

Bulkley's real concern regarding employment was not with the Negro immigrants, but rather with the Negro youth of New York City. "What shall be done with and for the

[14]Chart from Bulkley, "The Industrial Condition of the Negro in New York City," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (June, 1906).

boys and girls growing up in our city?" he asked. He felt the problem was to be solved in the schools. But, perhaps in jest, he complained that for a Negro boy to get vocational training in New York, he first would have to commit a crime; if he did that he would be arrested and sent to a reformatory, where manual training formed an important part of the school curriculum. Indeed, this situation probably was true of youth generally, for white boys ordinarily did not receive vocational training. However, the white youth could find employment somewhere within the business establishment, and if he were ambitious he usually made his way.

Several poignant examples of the inability of Dr. Bulkley to keep black youths in school, and failing that, to find employment for them were recorded in his writings. In one instance one of his promising boys was denied a job after answering an advertisement sent by the school administrators to all public school principals. The advertisement stated: "Bright, clear, industrious boy wanted to learn business." Bulkley suspected that "they did not comprehend colored boys under the generic term 'boys,' but" he thought it could not hurt to try. He wrote to inquire whether "they would give employment to a colored boy who could answer the question stated." The answer he received

was that a colored boy was not wanted, "however promising."

It is difficult to measure the effect that these discouraging and frequent examples of racial prejudice had on a person, especially on a leader like Bulkley, who was trying to convince his pupils that the solution to their problems required them to stay in school and accept his word that they would benefit in the future. One of the most moving incidents described by Bulkley seems to have brought out in him the desire to strike back and indict the entire white race. A bright boy came to see him one day, for his working papers. Bulkley was sorry to see him leave school, especially since if the boy had stayed at the school, "he might have a chance to get something better." Bulkley tried to convince him to remain in school, but the boy responded: "there is nothing better for a colored boy to do if he finished the course." Bulkley described his own reactions: "This reply pierced my heart like a white bolt. I shall remember that scene till my dying day. All the monster evils of prejudice passed before me in procession like the hideous creatures of an Inferno, and I thought of the millions of hopes that have been crushed, the intellects that have been stunted, the moral lives that have been gnarled and twisted, all because the iron heel of this base, hell-born caste is upon the neck of every boy, of every girl, who chanced to be born black."

When on Lincoln's birthday in 1909 Mary White Ovington put forth her plea: "We call upon all believers in democracy to join in a national conference for the discussion of present evils, the voicing of protests and the renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty," many came to join the movement. William Lewis Bulkley's name is one of the first to appear on the list as one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.[15]

Bulkley's most publicized achievement, however, was the formation in 1906 of the Committee for Improving the Industrial Condition of the Negro in New York City (CIICN).[16] Many prominent New Yorkers lent their names to the list of supporters of the organization, including William Jay Schieffelin, philanthropist, urban reformer and wealthy social leader.[17] Bulkley personally set up the committees and subcommittees of the CIICN which were to work in particular areas of service. The committee headings were: Employment, Neighborhood Work, Craftsmen, Publication, Trade Schools, Social Centers, Legal Affairs, and Public Meetings.[18]

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[15]Mary White Ovington, How the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Began (New York, 1909).

[16]New York Age, April 5, May 12, May 17, 1906.

[17]See Osofsky, Harlem, p. 65.

[18]New York Age, May 17, 1906.

Negroes in the various neighborhoods were encouraged to take part by bringing their problems to the committees, and local churches encouraged their congregations to work with them.

The names of skilled Negro workers were collected, and craftsmen were organized into small trade units for dressmakers, printers, mechanics, waiters, and carpenters. Local unions eased their restrictions under pressure from the CIICN. Trade schools were to be started, and at least a thousand persons registered for them.[19]

When in 1911 the National Urban League was born, a consolidation of the CIICN, the National League for the Protection of Colored Women, and the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, its first vice-chairman was William L. Bulkley, who gave the organization its motto, "Not Alms, But Opportunity."[20] The CIICN had grown out of Bulkley's ideas on vocational training, and he was anxious to put these ideas to work on a broader scale, for he had been successful in his evening school, and was concerned at the rising rate of population in the Negro areas and the resulting unemployment.

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[19] _Ibid_.

[20] Osofsky, _Harlem_, p. 66.

Bulkley's work in association with his duties as principal was described in an article, "The School as a Social Center."[21] He organized a kindergarten to relieve working mothers, and he personally delivered special lectures to parents and students on nutrition and sanitation, health and social problems.

In 1903 Bulkley started an evening school in the building of Public School 80 which specialized in industrial and commercial training. The students included older men and women who wanted to become literate.[22] He invited friends and associates to visit the school, and members of the Board of Education called it the most successful evening school in New York.[23]

Bulkley was so proud of his evening school and was so enthusiastic about showing it off that he wrote a letter to the <u>New York Times</u>, in a spirit most revealing his feeling of accomplishment. This is especially interesting when contrasted with his earlier sense of despair in describing the situations of his pupils in the day school. If poignant examples of despair and discouragement were a low point in his work in the day school, then the success of his evening

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[21] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 64.

[22] <u>Ibid.</u>, pp. 64-65.

[23] Bulkley, Letter to the editor of the New York Times, in <u>Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</u>, XXVII (June, 1906), 593.

school must have been one of the high-lights of his career as a principal, for he wrote the newspaper to announce his joy and to ask sophisticated New Yorkers to stop and look at his school in order to witness the new hope for the future. "I am sure there are not seven hundred happier people in any building in New York than those who are busy here to-night," he wrote the editor.[24] He compared his school to the theatre next door which was playing Dixon's "Clansman." "Within thirty feet of my office, where I now write this, the curtain is possibly being raised at this moment in an effort to portray the Negro race in the worst possible colors; within this building hundreds of the maligned race are at the same moment quietly but earnestly working at their books or in the trades." He continued to note that "not one of them cares a straw what slanders any marplot may heap upon them; happy, hopeful, busy, each and all. What a refutation to all the pessimism would it be if the audience in the theatre would take a recess for a few moments and go through our classrooms!" "Neither cold nor heat, snow nor moonshine, with all their attendant drawbacks or attractions

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[24] _Ibid_.

can keep these pupils away. In the theatre the audience is looking at the past; these people are looking at the future. To one crowd despair; to the other hope."[25] Then, as a postscript to the song of optimism, Bulkley made an appeal for the opening of similar schools, with an emphasis on industrial training, in Northern cities.

Bulkley's work in vocational education was criticized by some other Negro leaders. One of these, a follower of Booker T. Washington, wrote: "You will see that opponent of industrial education doesn't practice what he preaches."[26] Bulkley was a supporter of W. E. B. Dubois and did appear in fact to be a follower of one leader, while his ideas and his practices followed another leader. "This is inconsistency with a vengeance," commented Washington's group.[27] But to William Lewis Bulkley practical training in skilled craftsmanship was the key to opening the door to social equality.

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[25]*Ibid.*

[26]Osofsky, *Harlem*, p. 65.

[27]*Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.