

South Carolina Constitutional Convention | September 1895

from “On the Right of Suffrage”

Right: Portraits of the African American Republican delegates to the 1895 South Carolina Constitutional Convention: Robert B. Anderson, I.R. Reed, Robert Smalls, William J. Whipper, James Wigg, and Thomas E. Miller.

Excerpted from a collection of Robert Smalls' convention speeches compiled by his daughter, Sarah V. Smalls, from South Carolina's state records and published by Enquirer Print in Charleston, 1896.

I was born and raised in South Carolina and to-day I live on the very spot on which I was born, and I expect to remain here as long as the great God allows me to live, and I will ask no one else to let me remain. I love this State as much as any member of this Convention, because it is the garden spot of the South.

Mr. President [of the convention, Rep. John Gary Evans], this Convention has been called for no other purpose than the disfranchisement of the Negro. Be careful and bear in mind that the elections which are to take place early next month in very many of the States are watching the action of this Convention, especially on the suffrage question. Remember that the Negro was not brought here of his own accord. I found by reference to a history in the Congressional Library in Washington, written by Neil, that he says that in 1619, in the month of June a Dutch man-of-war landed at Jamestown, Va., with 15 sons of Africa aboard, at the time Miles Kendall was deputy Governor of Virginia. He refused to allow the vessel to be anchored in any of her harbors.

But he found out after his order had been sent out that the vessel was without provisions, and the crew was in a starving condition. He countermanded his order, and supplied the vessel with the needed provisions in exchange for 14 Negroes. It was then that the seed of slavery was planted in the land. So you see we did not come here of our own accord; we were brought here in a Dutch vessel, and we have been here ever since. The Dutch are here and are controlling the business of Charleston to-day. They are not to blame, and are not being blamed.

We served our masters faithfully, and willingly, and as we were made to do for 244 years. In the last war you left them home. You went to the war, fought, and came back home, shattered to pieces, worn out, one-legged, and found your wife and family being properly cared for by the Negroes you left behind. Why should you now seek to disfranchise a race that has been so true to you?



This Convention has a good leader in the person of the distinguished gentleman from Edgefield [Senator Benjamin Tillman]. Mr. President, when men go out shooting and want to shoot straight, they are compelled to shut one eye, and this leader uses only one eye in this Convention,* hence he is always striking the bull's eye; let him beware lest he strikes it one time too often. [Laughter.]

Since Reconstruction times 53,000 have been killed in the South, and not more than three white men have been convicted and hung for these crimes. I want you to be mindful of the fact that the good people of the North are watching this Convention upon this subject. I hope you will make a Constitution that will stand the test. I hope that we may be able to say when our work is done that we have made as good a Constitution as the one we are doing away with.

The Negroes are paying taxes in the South on \$263,000,000 worth of property. In South Carolina, according to the census, the Negroes pay tax on \$12,500,000 worth of property. That was in 1890. You voted down without discussion merely to lay on the table, a proposition for a simple property and educational qualification ... On behalf of the 600,000 Negroes in the State and the 132,000 Negro voters, all that I demand is that a fair and honest election law be passed. We care not what the qualifications imposed are: all that we ask is that they be fair and honest and honorable, and with these provisos we will stand or fall by it.

You have 102,000 white men over 21 years of age; 13,000 of these cannot read nor write. You dare not disfranchise them; and you know that the man who proposes it will never be elected to another office in the State of South Carolina ... Fifty-eight thousand Negroes cannot read nor write. This leaves a majority of 14,000 white men who can read and write over the same class of Negroes in this State. We are willing to accept a scheme that provides that no man who cannot read nor write can vote, if you dare pass it.

How can you expect an ordinary man to "understand and explain" any section of the Constitution, to correspond to the interpretation put upon it by the manager of election, when by a very recent decision of the Supreme Court, composed of the most learned men in the State, two of them put one construction upon a section, and the other Justice put an entirely different construction upon it? To embody such a provision in the election law would be to mean that every white man would interpret it aright and every Negro would interpret it wrong. I appeal to the gentleman from Edgefield to realize that he is not making a law for one set of men. Some morning you may wake up to find that the bone and sinew of your country is gone. The Negro is needed in the cotton fields and in the low country rice fields, and if you impose too hard conditions upon the Negro in this State there will be nothing else for him to do but to leave ...

* Senator Benjamin Tillman had only one eye, having lost his left eye to a tumor at age 17.