

DOCUMENTS

THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869 but growing to national importance in the 1880's, brought large numbers of skilled and unskilled Negro workers into the predominantly white labor movement. John W. Hayes, secretary of the Order, estimated that in 1886, when the membership of the Knights exceeded 700,000, there were no less than 60,000 Negro members. Some estimates place the figure even higher. In 1887, the New York *Sun* reported that there were 400 all-Negro locals in the Order, the bulk of them in the South where Negro workers were mainly concentrated.

The Knights were widely reported to have "broken the walls of prejudice." In Charleston, South Carolina, according to John Swinton, the distinguished labor editor, Negroes and whites were working in harmony as members of the Knights of Labor. "This is a grand stride," he wrote on May 16, 1886. "The organization of the Knights of Labor has done much for the South. When everything else had failed, the bond of poverty united the white and colored mechanic and laborer." George E. McNeill, a prominent labor leader, claimed that even in the South the "color line had been broken, and black and white were found working in the same cause."

The following letters from the South to Terence V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, reveal that the color line still remained a serious problem, and that the Knights did not succeed in breaking down the wall separating white and black. They also throw light on some of the special problems facing the Order when it moved into the South.

The original letters are in the Terence V. Powderly Papers at the library of the Catholic University of America and are published with the permission of the library. In reproducing the letters there has been no departure from the original text.

PHILIP S. FONER

Lincoln University (Pa.)

Savannah Ga Jan 23 87

Fraternally yours,
V E St. Cloud, Rs DA 139
Box 190, Savannah, Ga.

At the last regular session of DA #139 held this a.m. I was instructed to communicate with you, & ask for a reply, to the communication of Dec 10, 1886 in regard to the orgztion of a Colored Female Assembly, in this City. The communication referred to enclosed the Protests, forwarded to the DA by Several locals in the City, & asked you for a final decision in the case. We have received no reply up to date. Please favor us with your decision in the matter.

Fraternally yours,
V E St. Cloud, Rs DA 139
Box 190, Savannah, Ga.

Texarkana, Texas.
Jan. 26, 87.

TV Powd Esq.

Dar Sir:—

We, the colored people are greatly in need of an organizer. Down in this country the wt. people have set a decoy & fooled the colored people so much it is simply impossible for a wt. organizer to orgze them to any good. In view of this fact DA 145 elected me as orgzr for the colored people but before I sent my commission to you: the Secty of DA 145 said he got a letter from you stating that you would not appoint a man who has not been in the Order over 18 mos. Now sir:—I've been in the Order only 14 mos., been M.W. 12 & believe it to be very necessary to have a colored orgzr. I write you thinking you do not really know the true situation of things in this section of the country.

Yours for the Cause
W. H. Sims, M.D.

Blanks Sent March 7
Local Assembly No. 5127
Florence SC
March 4th 87.

Mr. Powderly Sir.

I tender you these few lines to ask you could not let us have let us have an orgzr, but the great trouble is that color line. Our white Brothers down South is not eager to orgze the Negro race, that's why

we appeal to you for a colored orgzer & if you apply favorably much good will be done in the State of South Carolina.

So I would be pleased to hear from you as early as possible.

I remain yours
Truly
SFS Sweet
Financial Sec'y

Moss Point Miss.

March 21st, 1887

Dear sir & brother

I drop you a few lines steing our presand condishion we are in a condishion so far dear brother we the brothers of Walkes Assembly do kindly ask of all of our brothers to assist us in building a hall the one we meet in now is so small that not more than half of our members can meet at once. We want to build us one at the earliest opportunity, we have the majority of labors in our mills now & dear brother I tell you the honest thruth I do beleave that we are treated worse than any humans on earth, and to call our selfs free men we have to leave home to go to work before daylight & it is black dar when we get home again, we have to work from daylight to twelve o'clock & we only get a half of an hour for dinner & then we go to work at half past twelve & work till dark & we only get from 90 cts to \$1.25 per day & dear brother I think it too hard, I kindly wait for a favorable reply from you.

Yours fraternaly
George H. Williams
MW 9048

Louisville Ky Dec 4, 1887

Bro Powd.

The greatest difficulties to be met all over the South are the old party leanings and color prejudice. These two are so mixed up & played upon by unscrupulous self seekers of every kind, some so called knights,—that a harmonious coming together of the divided elements will be little short of a modern miracle.

Fraternally,
Andrew McCormack
RS
DA 32

Berwick, Ga Dec 8 87

T V Powd
Scranton Pa
Dear Sir & Bro.

I am requested by LA 4738 to get your decision on the following. Said LA has about 250 members & there has about 20 joined the State Militia which the LA does not approve of, and have by a large majority vote requested the said militia to accept withdrawal cards, or be expelled from the Assembly. You will understand that the Militia in this State is not used for the purpose for which it is intended but for pol. purposes & to intimidate Labor as has just been demonstrated in the late Strike here on Sugar Plants. When K of L were shot down. It is supposed by the militia or at least while they were present & never made an effort to prevent the Killing so long as nothing but K of L were shot consequently LA 4738 does not want members who are subject to orders such as the militia of this State are & unless the LA can get rid of them it will cause it to break up as they are determined not to associate with them now the question you are requested to decide is. Is our Assembly of 250 compelled to retain as members 20 persons whom they do not want to associate with. In other words is there any way in which they can get rid of them & save the Assembly from breaking up.

Fraternally
B W Scott
D R S

Scranton Pa Jan 6 68

DA 194
B W Scott, Esq.
Berwick, Ga.
Dear Sir & Bro.

If your Assembly, with full knowledge of the facts & circumstances surrounding the case of our members who joined the Militia, are of the opinion that it is unwise for them to remain members of the Militia, they may request their withdrawal from the same, on the ground that there is no just cause why a member of the K of L should belong to an org. that is based upon violence.

The K of L is an org of peace, militia means war at some time or another. I think the matter can be adjusted by your own Assembly for since there is no law upon the matter the best judgment of the M.W. officers & members of the Assembly should be called into play & the case decided upon its merits.

I think it would be a safe plan for all workingmen to attend to their own peaceful occupations & not join any mil. co.; in case of

invasion rebellion or war of any kind in the state or our country at leage, why our members, I believe, could do volunteer service as well as though they were members of a mil. co. I therefore leave the matter with your assembly for decision.

Wishing you the compliments of the season, I remain,

Fraternally yours,

T V Powd.

By M E F, Sec.

Birmingh. Ala

Feb 17 88

T V Powd Esq.

Dear Sir & Brother.

Accept my sincere thanks for your photo. I assure you that whenever I have occasion to look at it, it will be with pride.

Now then to business. I have told my people that you are coming to Ala. rejoicing & renewed hope is on every lip, the diff. in our cond. is, in 68, only the black man was a Slave, in 88 the wt. & black man are in Slavery. The majority of our members are unable to pay the State & General tax 13¢ every 3 mos. their suffering is beyond your comprehension. These people look upon you as the coming Savior & for their Sake I beg you not to disappoint them. It would be worse than useless to attempt to have your lecture under a roof there is no bldg. in the State of Sufficient Capacity to accommodate a 5th of your audience and I would not think of asking you to visit us until your health is restored & the weather is pleasant. The 30th of May is our annual labor day. We hold our picnic in a beautiful park here in the City. If you will give us yourself on that day 10 or 12 thousand people will Surround you within its gates. As I said we are in a critical condition financially, the State Assembly is balanced between life and death, "but we will not down." Last year we charged an admission fee of 25¢. This year we intend to do the same. The proceeds are used for the best interests of the order.

The contents of this letter is confidential & I ask you as a Special favor not to think that I want you to come to Ala. on Speculation of any kind. If you come on the 30th of May though we will be able be bear your Expense in a way you deserve. I am done. You have heard my appeal. Give it your Earnest consideration & let me know the result at your leisure.

With fond wishes to you & yours I am

Sincerely & Fraternally yours,

B. Stock.

Jacksonville Fla

Apr 15 89

T V Powd

The Order in the South must of necessity be composed largely of the Negro race. The great bulk of the labor in this country is performed by colored hands, against whom a cultivated prejudice (akin to hate) is most intense. Ridiculous as it may appear to men of broader intelligence there are toilers with wt. skins, whose lot is in no sense superior to that of the black slave's, who will not join the Order because of the prejudice that has been instilled into them against the Negro. They have not yet learned the great lesson that greed makes no distinction in the color of the victims of its robbery.

Again, there are shrewd, calculating politicians who act solely with a view to personal gain, or to endeavor to control the colored vote. The greatest difficulties, so far, the Order has had to contend with have come from the contentions raised by this class of men in their struggles for leadership. In some localities the effect has tended largely to injure the Order, but it will grow upon the ruin of all such characters. It is a most encouraging fact that the colored people make good knights—they are exceedingly watchful of their liberty—and a strong and powerful org. of them is only a question of time.

Our State Master Workman, Bro. G. Y. Mott, works faithfully and earnestly, and with good results, though at times strongly antagonized. He is a mechanic—a worker with his paint brush—and a good one. Yet I am told that a few days ago he was “relievd” of a job on a banker's property, with no reason assigned, other than his “insurrectionary movements among the Negroes.” This, I consider, the best indorsement he could get, in the estimation of working people.

In Bro. J J Holland, I am persuaded you will find an able and efficient Lieutenant, especially for work in the South.

Yours fraternally,
J A Bodenhamer

The Eastern Marble Works
W D Stuart, Proprietor
Dealer in Tennessee Variegated Marbles
Furnished, Sawed & Rough Blocks in Wholesale to Dealers
Owing Mills.

Whitesburg, Miss.
Aug 18, 1890

TV Powd. G MW
Scranton Pa.
Dear Sir ;

I am mngr of this business—have been such for about 20 mos. When I first took charge there were branches in Columbus, Miss.

Decatur, Ala. Chattanooga, Tenn, as well as here. During the past 5 yrs. I have traveled over much of 9 So. Sts, & Been in a position to note the lamentable condition of labor; so I feel able to address you on this very vital subject—labor in the South. Of course, the great distracting source is negro competition. The negro is forced to accept 50 to 75 cents per day & that forces the wt man to take about the same. These wages will not enable a wt or black to ed. his children or feed them such food as will nourish body & brain properly. The poorer classes are becoming grosser every day because of their diet of corn meal and “sow-belly” from the beginning to the end of the years. In the name of charity for poor man, can not something be done to right this terrible wrong before oppressed labor endeavors to right it with force & thus increase the evil? I have evolved a partial remedy; but you may done more in the way of thinking on this line than I & more to the purpose. Standing at the head of a frt. org as you do, can you do, can you not start some reform? This dreadful competition of cheap labor in the so. must sooner or later very seriously effect the prices of wages in the north, and almost chivalize our great masses. I will be glad to aid in any movem, to better the condition of labor in the so. but not in an open way unless it be in connection with an orgzed effort; for to move in the matter is to stir up the most intense prejudices of the wts. & to combat with the dense ignorance of the blacks & “poor wt. trash,” & which of the 3 would be most to overcome is hard to say. In self defense the Knights ought to move in the matter at once.

That you may be assured that you are not being imposed upon I wish to say that I am originally from Ohio; am a marble workman in its branches, but for years past have been in thl lapap eerwnsle all its branches, but for years past have been in the newspaper work—In inclose one of my old business cards. Allow me to also refer to ex-Lieut. Gov. Lyon of Ohio as to my identity.

Can I be of service to you in bringing about some greatly to be desired reforms? Hoping that your efforts to advance the cause of labor may fully succeed, I am yours Truly,

C. C. Mehurin

P.S. I am corresp. of some city dailies, & may use them to a *little* purpose. CC M.

Office of J. H. Washburn
 Dealer in Dry Goods, Clothing, Boots, Shoes & Millinery
 Humansville, Mo. Jan. 20, 1891

Mr. T V Powd, G M W
 Seranton Pa.

Dear Sir & Bro. K of L

Will you be Kind Enough to give us the info. as to where the first anti-Slave org. was orgzed. Some of our Bros. have made the Assertion that it was orgzed in the basement of a colized Schoolhouse in Boston and have been challenged for the proof of the Statement. Answer at once.

Fraternally Yours,
M. I. Mattox

Powderly answered that it was not possible to tell when it started, and gave a few facts on Garrison and Wendell Phillips.

SIX "NEW" MEDAL OF HONOR MEN

The publication in 1967 of Irvin H. Lee's *Negro Medal of Honor Men* and its attendant publicity has brought renewed attention to those Negroes who earned this nation's highest military decoration. Lee's count of 44 Negro recipients (pre-1967) has long been accepted by scholars and the Department of Defense. However, a re-examination of certain files at the War Records Office of the National Archives yielded six Medal of Honor recipients who had not previously been known to scholars as Negroes. Undoubtedly, more extensive research will reveal more Negroes in the Medal of Honor rolls.¹

William H. Brown

William H. Brown and Wilson Brown are listed on page 17 of the Navy's *Medal of Honor* and both took part in the Civil War naval engagement of August 5, 1864 in Mobile Bay.

William H. Brown was serving aboard the U.S.S. *Brooklyn* and was stationed in the area known as the shell whips "which were twice cleared of men by bursting shells." Brown, read his citation, "remained steadfast at his post and performed his duties in the powder division throughout the furious action which resulted in the surrender of the prize rebel ram *Tennessee* and in the damaging and destruction of batteries at Fort Morgan." The Muster Rolls of the steamer

¹ William Loren Katz, "Courage Beyond the Call of Duty," *Saturday Review* (June 17, 1967) 30-31; Harry C. Dillingham to James C. Evans, February 8, 1966; James C. Evans to W. L. Katz, April 7, 1967.