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THE NIAGARA MOVEMENT
100th Anniversary
1905-2005
Preface

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Scope

The Topical Research Intern Program provides the opportunity for Service members and civilians of the Department of Defense (DoD) and U.S. Coast Guard to work on a diversity/equal opportunity project while on a 30-day tour of duty at the Institute. During their tours, the interns use a variety of primary and secondary source materials to compile research pertaining to an issue of importance to equal opportunity (EO) and equal employment opportunity (EEO) personnel, supervisors, and other leaders throughout the Services. The resulting publications (such as this one) are intended as resource and educational materials and do not represent official policy statements or endorsements by the DoD, U.S. Coast Guard or any of their agencies. The publications are distributed to EO/EEO personnel and senior officials to aid them in their duties. To reach the widest audience possible, the publications are posted on the Internet at: https://www.patrick.af.mil/deomi/deomi.htm.

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Introduction

*In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.*

Booker T. Washington, 1895

*The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.*

W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903

The above quotes – the former, the seminal enunciation of an acceptance of the doctrine of separate but equal in Washington’s “Atlanta Compromise” speech; the latter, Du Bois’s opening salvo in *The Souls of Black Folk* – are as famous as any uttered or written by prominent African Americans between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. And, in a nutshell, they capture the spirit of the division that led to the establishment of the Niagara Movement, what Philip S. Foner calls “the first important Negro protest movement” of the Post-Reconstruction period (1972, p. 664).

Unarguably, what is best known about the Niagara Movement is not what it did, when it did it, or what it stood for, but what it became. The majority of encyclopedic references to the Niagara Movement dismiss it as a good idea that succumbed to financial and organizational woes and then quickly move on to a discussion of what came next. What this movement, in large part, became – what came next – was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the N.A.A.C.P. But there’s a lot more to the story than that.

The Niagara Movement was born in the minds of a small group of Black intellectuals, led by William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.) Du Bois, in a secret meeting at the Michigan Street Baptist Church in Buffalo, NY (Bradberry, n.d.) and then emerged onto a larger stage during its first conference, held shortly thereafter on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls in July, 1905. Although it would exist in that form and under that name until only 1909, the movement engaged many of the prickliest issues of its day – issues like inequality of opportunity and institutional racism that many would argue today have not been resolved – and continues to occupy the attentions of scholars and commentators nearly a century later.

For those reasons alone, the Niagara Movement remains fit fodder for study and discussion. Likewise, those reasons give a glimpse into why you have very likely never heard of, or at most given any thought to, the Niagara Movement. It was widely attacked in its day as a movement dependent on agitation and focused on, self avowedly, the Black and largely middle-class Talented Tenth: what Du Bois would later define as “leadership of the Negro race in America by a trained few” (Lewis, 1995, p. 347). Much of the
scholarly debate today surrounding Du Bois and the Niagara Movement (e.g., West, 1998-2000; Marable, 1998) tackles that same issue of inextricably intertwined race and class.

The purpose of this booklet, prepared in celebration of Black History Month 2005 and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Niagara Movement, is threefold: gather widely strewn information on this important but largely overlooked African American movement and some of its key members; situate it in some sort of historical context; and argue that many of the issues that fueled debate over the Niagara Movement in the first decade of the twentieth century are equally relevant and worthy of our collective discourse in the first decade of the twenty-first.

This essay is brought to you through the miracle of the written word. Written language separates humans from all other species and can be a vehicle for deep and abiding communication and understanding. It can also constitute the slipperiest of slopes, particularly where the construction of meaning and charged terminology have evolved over time. The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably throughout this paper, and the terms Negro and Colored will be used as quoted and in historical context as appropriate.

Historical Context

The problem of determining the place that Negroes should occupy in American life was the most difficult of the “racial” problems that confronted the American government and people after the Civil War.

Rayford W. Logan, 1954

Reconstruction through the end of the nineteenth century

The prospects for a better way of life for African Americans, particularly for southern Blacks, seemed to take a monumental step forward at the end of the Civil War with the Emancipation Proclamation and passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. The high, however, was short lived. Politely put, “indifference of national authority to black lives and rights” (Shapiro, 1988, p. 6) meant that new coping methods would be required to ensure survival, let alone prosperity, particularly in recently Confederate states where all power and authority lay in the hands of Whites.

Throughout Reconstruction the South was the setting for a kind of informal civil war in which those committed to a democratic, equalitarian vision of the future confronted those who would do everything in their power to establish a society rooted in hierarchical institutions of race and class (Ibid., p. 8).

The “Party of Lincoln,” as the Republican Party is known, occupied the moral high ground on many issues of Reconstruction, but there was considerable disagreement
among groups within the party and even more distance between political decisions being made at the national level and the harsh realities of life in the post-bellum South.

Immediately after the war, “more attention was given to the reconstruction of Southern institutions than to the elevation of the ex-slave” (Coombs, 1972, p. 88). Within two years after the end of the war, however, President Andrew Johnson had come within one vote of being impeached, the Fourteenth Amendment was passed and Reconstruction began again.

The waning decades of the nineteenth century saw little improvement in the material lives of southern Blacks. Issues like early American efforts at overseas colonialism tended to impact African Americans inordinately, but come “the turn of the century black Americans set a precedent for the actions of blacks in future decades who would not be silent on the great issues of war and peace” (Shapiro, p. 90). Likewise, African American voices could be heard ever more clearly on other issues of importance, but the response around that time was swift and foreboding.

Social/military/political landscape at the turn of the twentieth century

The infamous 1896 Supreme Court ruling on Plessy v. Ferguson put the high court’s stamp of approval on segregation and “gave its blessing to the Jim Crow system” of laws cloaked in a philosophy of separate but equal (Coombs, p. 96).

Some (e.g. Logan, 1954) blame the larger geo-political climate for a combination of neglect and self-interested decisions by the dominant culture that facilitated several steps backward for African Americans during this period. Rapid colonial shifts around the globe dominated the attentions of virtually every European country that might have acted to reverse the disturbing trends toward civil rights in the U.S. Likewise, emergent U.S. imperialist tendencies occupied more and more of political Washington’s attention.

Shapiro refers to this shift in the 1890s as a “new framework for the black struggle.” He continues that American colonialism, raising issues of dominating other nonwhite populations, sharpened racial antagonisms within the United States. As Confederate veterans and northern Republicans united in war against Spain, stepping forward as the champions of oppressed Cubans, the contradiction between the assumed role of upholding freedom abroad and the reality of racial oppression at home was glaringly apparent (p. 64).

Some prominent African Americans who would later become founding members of the Niagara Movement were clearly aware of and concerned by this. One of the epigraphs that began this essay refers to the central importance of “the problem of the color-line.” One of the things that is interesting in the vast majority of references to this quote is what is invariably left off. Du Bois actually begins chapter II of The Souls of Black Folk – “Of the Dawn of Freedom” – with the following words: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, -- the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Scholars
such as Wegener (1999) have successfully argued that this is a thinly veiled reference to “American expansion” in places like the Caribbean and Philippines (p. 484). Previous to that, in 1900, Du Bois had written that

> [t]he Spanish war and its various sequels...[has led to] a significant change in public opinion – a growing indifference to human suffering, a practical surrender of the doctrine of equality, of citizenship, and a new impetus to the cold commercial aspect of racial intercourse; all this means increased difficulty in stirring the heart of the nation to such great reformatory movements as the proper solution of the Negro problems demands (1978, p. 65).

Later, more poetically but more ominously, he would write: “I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations whiter and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength” (Lewis, 1995, p. 105). Then, most pointedly in 1908, he would refer to “‘the Rape of Cuba and the Conquest of the Philippines’ [as] the blackest deeds in American history since the Seminole Wars” (Lewis, 1993, p. 338).

In the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, Charles W. Chesnutt, another founding member of the Niagara Movement and a “significant new literary presence among African Americans” (Wegener, p. 484), imbued his work with a “responsiveness to American imperial conceit” (Wegener, p. 465). Increasing American power, prestige and coffers – through expansion as well as strong new tariffs – was the overwhelming national political and foreign policy focus.

On the home front, the administrations of Hayes, Garfield, Arthur and Cleveland were generally marked by a *laissez faire* approach to southern issues and race relations. Much on these topics was debated and discussed in public fora; little of substance was accomplished, leaving more and more latitude to states, which particularly in the South, was eagerly seized upon to retrench White Supremacy.

Both Democrats and Republicans occupied the White House during this period, although, says Logan, it “made little difference…. Party platforms were frankly hypocritical on the constitutional rights of Negroes. Presidents of both parties uttered pious platitudes, but said nothing and did nothing” (p. 61). On the national party stage, Radical Republicans, embracing philosophical progressivism, appeared to hold the best chance for African Americans to make substantial progress towards realizing the rights and equalities implicit in emancipation. But those hopes disappeared into “the notorious blind spot of progressivism, namely, racial equality and civil rights” (Schafer, 2001, p. 925). In fact, many of the mild efforts at voting rights and education improvements for African Americans attempted, particularly under Harrison, “provoked a counteroffensive” (Logan, p. 87) that left southern Blacks at greater peril, not only for their rights but for their very security.

African Americans serving in the military fell somewhere in the middle of these overlapping issues. Having served admirably and decisively during the Civil War, still-segregated units played a prominent, though politically controversial, role in the Spanish
American War, fighting alongside Teddy Roosevelt. But conditions and opportunities for Black soldiers and sailors were decidedly dismal and limited, as were their compensations.

Two schools of thought

What is readily apparent is that there was a growing divide between the civil rights advancements for African Americans as they appeared on paper and the ways in which those rights were suppressed in actuality. The dominant voice on this issue – the dominant public voice on all issues African American after the death of Frederick Douglass – was Booker T. Washington.

Born a Virginia plantation slave in 1856, Washington worked his way through three years at Hampton Institute as a teenager and was eventually named headmaster of a Negro normal school in Tuskegee, Alabama. Washington built Tuskegee Institute into a world-renowned school that stressed industrial education over all else. His unbending commitment to this notion – that, as Foner put it, “the Negro must win dignity and respect by self-help” (p. 578) – would persist throughout the rest of his professional life.

It was in 1895, the year that Frederick Douglass died, that the mantle of Black political leadership in America passed to Washington. This was cemented, at least in the minds of Whites, during his famous speech on September 18, 1895 at the Cotton States and International Exposition at Atlanta, Georgia – what has come to be known as the Atlanta Compromise speech.

On that day, Washington referred to African Americans collectively as “[i]gnorant and inexperienced” (1901, p. 106). Because of this state, Washington continued, Blacks must all begin their journeys at the bottom, “by starting a dairy farm or truck garden” rather than engaging in public and political discourse (p. 106). The most famous line from the address, the first epigraph for this paper, presents a metaphor that epitomizes the doctrine of separate but equal: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (p. 107). Foner summarizes the Atlanta speech this way:

Washington proposed a compromise by which the Negro would not ask for social or political equality in return for a pledge that he would be provided with industrial training and the opportunity to take a place in the economic development of the New South (p. 578).

Not surprisingly, this was an approach that received high marks from Whites. It played into the hands of southern Whites who wanted African Americans to keep their historic places as separate and second-class citizens. Likewise, it was popular among northern industrialists who saw unambitious Blacks, trained in industrial arts, as a valuable source of low-wage labor. As Washington’s biographer puts it, “[h]is was a conservative social Darwinist proposition that whites everywhere readily accepted”
Hewing to this line served to reinforce Washington’s prominence. President Cleveland (as Washington reprints in his autobiography) sent the Tuskegeean a letter of congratulations on his Atlanta speech in which he writes, “[y]our words cannot fail to delight and encourage all who wish well for your race” (Washington, 1901, p. 110). Newspapers all over the country reprinted the speech. Southern papers in particular trumpeted the wisdom of Washington’s position. In 1898, he lunched with President McKinley in Chicago, and in October of 1901, he had dinner with President Roosevelt. This last event was an overnight “sensation” (Harlan, p. 3), entangling southern emotions with regard to race, geography and political affiliations, but it also meant Washington’s persona and positions grew ever larger and more prominent.

As he constantly maneuvered to buttress his public position and political standing, Washington clearly anticipated the source and tenor of contrasting opinions likely to emerge among other Black voices. As he tried to assert at Atlanta,

[...]he wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing (Washington, 1901, p. 108).

Principal among “the wisest” who saw it another way was W. E. B. Du Bois. Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, his life – except for also being a Black man in America and having known poverty as a youngster – could not have been more different from Washington’s. The child of a northern family that had long been free, he was a serious student who studied at historically Black Fisk University before earning an undergraduate degree at Harvard, beginning graduate work in History at Harvard, studying abroad at the University of Berlin, and in 1895 – the same year Washington addressed the Atlanta Exposition – returning to receive the first doctorate granted to an African American by Harvard University.

Du Bois harbored a differing view from Washington’s on the question of the way ahead for African Americans during this contentious time in our nation’s history, a period that Logan famously says “marked the nadir of the Negro’s status in American society” (p. 62). He makes the first and most complete statement of his differing views in his 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*, but his pen was active everywhere, from letters to broadsheets, fiction to drama. Du Bois was poised to set up the dominant power struggle among prominent African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century precisely by showing Washington that he was, in fact, one of “the wisest among [his] race” and, in direct defiance of Washington, by dedicating himself to fomenting “agitation of questions of social equality” at every opportunity. Beginning in 1905, the primary vehicle for this agitation was the Niagara Movement.
The Niagara Movement

_The often acrimonious debate between Du Bois and Washington is the cornerstone of an endless ideological discourse in black America._

Herb Boyd, 1998

Prelude to a movement

Given the socio-economic conditions that prevailed for African Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century – with reversal of the hopes promised by Reconstruction, enactment of Jim Crow laws that codified second-class, under-educated, non-voting citizenship, and an increasing wave of vigilante violence targeted against Blacks\(^1\) – a growing cadre of educated Black professionals agreed that “work and wait” wasn’t cutting it. Du Bois dubbed this group the Talented Tenth and believed they must lead “the Mass” of African Americans through development and application of “intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and the relation of men to it” (Du Bois, 1903). In *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968), written while Du Bois was in his nineties, he put it perhaps more succinctly: “I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization” (p. 236).

This was, at the time, considered a radical view. But there were others out there pursuing similar lines of thought. Foremost among them was William Monroe Trotter, editor and publisher of the *Guardian* in Boston, whom Vernon (1999) describes as “more militant, independent-thinking, and rigidly moralistic than most fellow members of the…‘talented tenth’” (p. 34). Trotter had organized what was over-billed as the Boston “Riot” in 1903, a disturbance that disrupted Washington during a speech before a mixed audience of 2,000 in a Boston church and caused the Tuskegeean “the greatest embarrassment of his career to date” (Lewis, 1993, p. 301). In a footnote, Rucker (2002) recounts that it was the unfair arrest and sentencing of Trotter over this event that sparked Du Bois to create the Niagara Movement (p. 45, note 4). That, perhaps, and the machinations of Washington under girding a sham entity he organized called the Committee of Twelve for the Advancement of the Interests of the Negro Race, a national body that Du Bois briefly co-led but abandoned when its purely Bookerite agendas emerged. Washington’s primary biographer, Louis R. Harlan (1983), asserts that the Committee of Twelve’s “failure to achieve any unity or even truce among the factions pointed inevitably toward the Niagara Movement a year later” (p. 84).

\(^{1}\) Ida B. Wells, an early member of the Niagara Movement and a founding member of the N.A.A.C.P., created a considerable stir when she wrote *A Red Record (1895)*, which contained tabulated lynching statistics for the period 1892-94. Derived only from published accounts – hence, unquestionably low – it nonetheless painted a portrait of “informal justice” running amuck: 159 lynchings in 16 states and territories in 1893 alone, from Auburn, NY to Selina, KS; Decatur, IL to Poplar Head, L.A.
Select black educators, lawyers and clergy, like John Hope, J. R. Clifford and Sutton Griggs, shared similar views to Du Bois and Trotter: that accommodation of segregation was a dead end for African Americans. Feeling that the prestige he had known as a result of *The Souls of Black Folk* was crumbling under the superior political might of the Tuskegee Machine, and after consulting with St. Paul criminal lawyer F. L. McGhee and Chicago physician Charles E. Bentley, Du Bois, in July of 1905, sent out a call, inviting a select group to form a national strategy board to develop principles that might counter Washington’s influence and guide Blacks toward a fuller realization of their rights and collective potential.

1905: The first conference

Fifty-nine members of the Talented Tenth were invited. The conference was intended to be held in Buffalo, New York, at a location with symbolic value as a terminus of the Underground Railroad. At the last minute, all hotel rooms in town mysteriously filled up, and the site was moved to the Erie Beach Hotel on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, in the town of Fort Erie, Ontario. Du Bois demonstrated his personal commitment to the cause by hiring the hotel on speculation, then waited for people to show up. In 1940, he wrote that “[i]f sufficient men had not come to pay for the hotel, I should certainly have been in bankruptcy and perhaps in jail” (1968, p. 88). In all, twenty-nine attended the secret sessions at Niagara Falls. As reported in Rudwick (1960) from an unpublished 1940 manuscript of Ralph Bunche’s, “[m]any more were expected but, according to rumors, they declined at the last minute after being pressured by white friends of Booker T. Washington” (p. 94). Lewis (1993) accounts for about half of the thirty who signed the Call but did not show up as having been “likely kept away by genuine conflicts in schedule, or by financial or family problems, rather than by eleventh-hour caution” (p. 318).

Those who attended represented fourteen states and every region of the country, with the exception of the logistically impossible Far West. Seven arrived from New England states, eight from the Midwest, six from the South and four each from Mid-Atlantic states and the District of Columbia.

Although membership was initially all Black and officially all male, women were definitely present and played a behind-the-scenes role. After overcoming Trotter’s initial opposition, women would become official members prior to the Movement’s second conference, in 1906, and membership would also eventually be offered to a few select, sympathetic Whites.

Du Bois saw this first gathering as an opportunity to get organized, share ideas and to draft both a blueprint for future action and a declaration of principles that would garner attention and support for a differing viewpoint from Washington’s – one synthesized from the hearts and minds of men “secure enough in their professions and principles to risk Booker Washington’s retribution,” men Du Bois celebrated as “‘educated, determined, and unpurchasable’” (Lewis, 1993, p. 316). Du Bois himself came armed with his best ideas for an organizational model that had been rejected
outright a year earlier during the initial founding efforts of the Bookerite-dominated Committee of Twelve.

To no one’s surprise, Du Bois was immediately elected general secretary, and the assembled set about organizing themselves for the anticipated growth of a national movement. A simple structure was chosen, with the chairmen of each state association seated on an executive committee. The broad aims of the Niagara Movement are reflected in the additional committees that were established at Fort Erie:

- Finance
- Interstate Conditions and Needs
- Organization
- Civil and Political Rights
- Legal Defense
- Crime
- Rescue and Reform
- Economic Opportunity
- Health
- Education
- Press and Public Opinion

(Rudwick, 1960, p. 95)

The lofty but disciplined ambitions of the Niagarites are captured in the Declaration of Principles, an amalgam of contemporary ideas and demands shared by the conferees. This bold redrafting of the guidelines for the future of African Americans (Lewis, 1993, p. 322), “written in vigorous and sharp tones” (Rudwick 1969, p. 132), “crackled with indignation and brimmed with imperatives” (Lewis, 1993, p. 321). Although Washington’s domination of major media outlets – both Black and White – drastically handicapped the exposure this document received, it remains today a sobering and moving call for justice, equality and the destruction of artificial barriers.

The 1905 Niagara Movement Declaration of Principles is reprinted below from the Yale University archives (http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1152.htm).

Declaration of Principles

PROGRESS: The members of the conference, known as the Niagara Movement, assembled in annual meeting at Buffalo, July 11th, 12th and 13th, 1905, congratulate the Negro-Americans on certain undoubted evidences of progress in the last decade, particularly the increase of intelligence, the buying of property, the checking of crime, the uplift in home life, the advance in literature and art, and the demonstration of constructive and executive ability in the conduct of great religious, economic and educational institutions.

SUFFRAGÉ: At the same time, we believe that this class of American citizens should protest emphatically and continually against the curtailment of their
political rights. We believe in manhood suffrage; we believe that no man is so good, intelligent or wealthy as to be entrusted wholly with the welfare of his neighbor.

CIVIL LIBERTY: We believe also in protest against the curtailment of our civil rights. All American citizens have the right to equal treatment in places of public entertainment according to their behavior and deserts.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY: We especially complain against the denial of equal opportunities to us in economic life; in the rural districts of the South this amounts to peonage and virtual slavery; all over the South it tends to crush labor and small business enterprises; and everywhere American prejudice, helped often by iniquitous laws, is making it more difficult for Negro-Americans to earn a decent living.

EDUCATION: Common school education should be free to all American children and compulsory. High school training should be adequately provided for all, and college training should be the monopoly of no class or race in any section of our common country. We believe that, in defense of our own institutions, the United States should aid common school education, particularly in the South, and we especially recommend concerted agitation to this end. We urge an increase in public high school facilities in the South, where the Negro-Americans are almost wholly without such provisions. We favor well-equipped trade and technical schools for the training of artisans, and the need of adequate and liberal endowment for a few institutions of higher education must be patent to sincere well-wishers of the race.

COURTS: We demand upright judges in courts, juries selected without discrimination on account of color and the same measure of punishment and the same efforts at reformation for black as for white offenders. We need orphanages and farm schools for dependent children, juvenile reformatories for delinquents, and the abolition of the dehumanizing convict-lease system.

PUBLIC OPINION: We note with alarm the evident retrogression in this land of sound public opinion on the subject of manhood rights, republican government and human brotherhood, arid we pray God that this nation will not degenerate into a mob of boasters and oppressors, but rather will return to the faith of the fathers, that all men were created free and equal, with certain unalienable rights.

HEALTH: We plead for health—for an opportunity to live in decent houses and localities, for a chance to rear our children in physical and moral cleanliness.

EMPLOYERS AND LABOR UNIONS: We hold up for public execration the conduct of two opposite classes of men: The practice among employers of importing ignorant Negro-American laborers in emergencies, and then affording them neither protection nor permanent employment; and the practice of labor
unions in proscribing and boycotting and oppressing thousands of their fellow-toilers, simply because they are black. These methods have accentuated and will accentuate the war of labor and capital, and they are disgraceful to both sides.

PROTEST: We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro-American assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before insults. Through helplessness we may submit, but the voice of protest of ten million Americans must never cease to assail the ears of their fellows, so long as America is unjust.

COLOR-LINE: Any discrimination based simply on race or color is barbarous, we care not how hallowed it be by custom, expediency or prejudice. Differences made on account of ignorance, immorality, or disease are legitimate methods of fighting evil, and against them we have no word of protest; but discriminations based simply and solely on physical peculiarities, place of birth, color of skin, are relics of that unreasoning human savagery of which the world is and ought to be thoroughly ashamed.

“JIM CROW” CARS: We protest against the “Jim Crow” car, since its effect is and must be to make us pay first-class fare for third-class accommodations, render us open to insults and discomfort and to crucify wantonly our manhood, womanhood and self-respect.

SOLDIERS: We regret that this nation has never seen fit adequately to reward the black soldiers who, in its five wars, have defended their country with their blood, and yet have been systematically denied the promotions which their abilities deserve. And we regard as unjust, the exclusion of black boys from the military and naval training schools.

WAR AMENDMENTS: We urge upon Congress the enactment of appropriate legislation for securing the proper enforcement of those articles of freedom, the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments of the Constitution of the United States.

OPPRESSION: We repudiate the monstrous doctrine that the oppressor should be the sole authority as to the rights of the oppressed. The Negro race in America stolen, ravished and degraded, struggling up through difficulties and oppression, needs sympathy and receives criticism; needs help and is given hindrance, needs protection and is given mob-violence, needs justice and is given charity, needs leadership and is given cowardice and apology, needs bread and is given a stone. This nation will never stand justified before God until these things are changed.

THE CHURCH: Especially are we surprised and astonished at the recent attitude of the church of Christ—of an increase of a desire to bow to racial prejudice, to narrow the bounds of human brotherhood, and to segregate black men to some
outer sanctuary. This is wrong, unchristian and disgraceful to the twentieth century civilization.

AGITATION: Of the above grievances we do not hesitate to complain, and to complain loudly and insistently. To ignore, overlook, or apologize for these wrongs is to prove ourselves unworthy of freedom. Persistent manly agitation is the way to liberty, and toward this goal the Niagara Movement has started and asks the cooperation of all men of all races.

HELP: At the same time we want to acknowledge with deep thankfulness the help of our fellowmen from the Abolitionist down to those who today still stand for equal opportunity and who have given and still give of their wealth and of their poverty for our advancement.

DUTIES: And while we are demanding, and ought to demand, and will continue to demand the rights enumerated above, God forbid that we should ever forget to urge corresponding duties upon our people:

- The duty to vote.
- The duty to respect the rights of others.
- The duty to work.
- The duty to obey the laws.
- The duty to be clean and orderly.
- The duty to send our children to school.
- The duty to respect ourselves, even as we respect others.

This statement, complaint and prayer we submit to the American people, and Almighty God.

With that, twenty-nine men set out from the Erie Beach Hotel, intent on turning these goals into reality.

Not surprisingly, shortly after the first conference concluded and its Declaration began to appear in the few available, friendly media outlets, Washington dismissed it in a speech to the National Negro Business League as “so much idle talk” (Lewis, 1993, p. 323). Although conferees at Niagara had intentionally refrained from targeting Washington and his legions personally, recognizing that “there would be enough difficulty in gaining public support without creating additional obstacles by appearing to be blusteringly anti-Washingtonian” (Rudwick, 1960, p. 94), the movement struggled to find a public voice, and initial growth was small.

The first year of the Niagara Movement met with – as would, more or less, succeeding years – relatively insignificant growth in membership, considering the movement’s lofty ambitions and the apparent hunger among African Americans for an alternative to accommodation. Within two months, Du Bois announced that membership was up to fifty-four (fewer even than were invited to the first conference). By the end of
1905, the movement claimed one hundred and fifty members. Branches are reported to have existed in seventeen states, with plans underway for another thirteen.

Broadcasting the ideas and activities of the Niagara Movement was essential to Du Bois’s goals. Newspapers said to be “carrying the Niagara message to the people” were logged in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Maryland, Oregon and Virginia (Rudwick, 1969, p. 134). Additional periodicals focused on covering issues pertinent to the aims of the Niagara Movement were the *Voice of the Negro* and the *Moon*. The former was a new African American magazine edited by Virginia Union University graduate J. Max Barber. And although it was “the best edited black magazine of its brief time” (Harlan, 1983, p. 105), as Lewis (1993) writes,

Barber not only opened his magazine to Du Bois, he would make it the unofficial organ of the Niagara Movement until he was forced [thanks to Washington’s influence] to leave Atlanta in 1906. From then on, he would be blocked by [Washington] in every attempt to make a new start until, finally, Barber abandoned journalism and turned to dentistry (p. 319).

The latter, formally titled the *Moon Illustrated Weekly*, was a three-person operation started in Memphis on $2,734.74, the collected savings of Du Bois and two of his former students. Despite the fact that Washington and his allies pressured potential lenders and publishers to steer away from providing any resources or support to the *Moon*, the three managed to turn out a weekly publication – “the first illustrated weekly in Afro-America” (Lewis, 1993, p. 325) – from December 2, 1905 until the summer of 1906, although it never lived up to Du Bois’s goal of producing “a literary and news digest for Negroes around the world” (Rudwick, 1969, p. 137).

Getting the word out was paramount to the Niagara Movement in its quest for “African-American voting rights, freedom of speech and the abolition of racial discrimination” (Bowser, 1997, p. 1-A). The largely successful efforts by Washington to prevent that seemed to prove, at least in spirit, the controversial charge leveled by Du Bois in a January 1905 essay in the *Voice of the Negro* that the Tuskegee Machine used bribes (namely, $3,000 in one year) to control the press.

Slightly more successful in 1905 was the delicate courtship being carried out between the Niagara Movement and the one year-older, interracial Constitution League. Both groups shared an interest in supporting the Platt Bill, which sought to penalize states that disfranchised Black voters by reducing their Congressional delegations accordingly. The founder of the Constitution League, John Milholland, was loath to challenge the position of Washington (who, naturally, opposed the Platt Bill), but he saw in the Niagara Movement a potential source of grass-roots influence on Congress. Du Bois saw in the Constitution League a like-minded organization that offered public speaking venues for members of the Niagara Movement. Rudwick (1969) indicates that Du Bois actively sought a merger of the two and suggests that “the cause of racial advancement would have been served better” if that had happened but concludes that some members of the Niagara Movement may have been suspect of the Constitution League because of its
White membership (p. 137). Such a coalition would have to wait another four years for the founding of the N.A.A.C.P.

As 1906 unfolded, Du Bois and his fellows realized it was time to have another conference. This time, instead of the clandestine gathering at Niagara Falls, it would be as public as the membership could possibly make it.

1906: An address to the country

In the months leading up to the second conference, Du Bois and Trotter faced a potentially divisive issue. The notoriously hardheaded Trotter was adamantly opposed to the inclusion of women in the movement. Du Bois, whose public career demonstrates a strong feminist bent, felt otherwise. Du Bois prevailed, first organizing a Massachusetts Niagara Women’s Auxiliary and then arranging for the issue of their full integration to be on the agenda for the next national meeting.²

But where to have the next conference? History, logistics and the cycles of nature all conspired to offer the Niagarites the perfect gathering place: Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia. Selecting dates in August of 1906, the Niagara Movement promoted its second conference as marking both the 100th anniversary of the birth of abolitionist John Brown³, whose martyrdom was sealed during his raid on Harper’s Ferry, and the 50th anniversary of the battle of Osawatomie, the largest of the battles during the Bleeding Kansas era, fought between those who favored free state status for Kansas and Nebraska and those who sought to live in a slave-holding state. It also ensured the conference would take place during a season when the mountains of West Virginia were at their greenest, offering a sublime backdrop to the lofty rhetoric that would issue forth. Most prosaic, but probably of greatest actual importance: location, location, location. Harper’s Ferry was cheap and easy to reach, round-trip train fare for the one-hour ride from Washington, D.C. only $1. The conference was staged August 15-19 on the grounds of Storer College, overlooking Harper’s Ferry. Storer had been established by the Home Mission Society of the Free Baptist Church in 1867 as a school for educating former slaves and, thus, provided yet another motive for choosing Harper’s Ferry.

Just as he had done at Niagara Falls, Du Bois arrived at Harper’s Ferry about a week before the rest of the conferees. Rudwick (1969) indicates that members of the local African American community were a little put off both by his demeanor (“arrogance”) and his reputation as a radical (p. 137-8). Nonetheless, arrangements were finalized, and between forty-five and one hundred members of the movement showed up at Storer (Starkey, 1996), quickly getting down to the organization’s business.

² Dr. Anita Nahal, a post-doctoral fellow in international affairs and women’s studies at Howard University, specifically chose to focus her research on African American Women and the Niagara Movement because “it was the first race movement of the 20th century where women participated” (Nahal, n.d.)
³ The actual date of John Brown’s birth was May 9, 1800, meaning the conference took place three months after what would have been Brown’s 106th birthday.
Various committee chairmen reported. The head of the Health Committee asked the group to sponsor a national campaign against tuberculosis, and one member suggested that Negro clergymen should co-operate in popularizing “the gospel of cleanliness, water, and air.” John Hope, chairman of the Education Committee, recommended that Niagara men prepare, for legislators and the interested public, a pamphlet on conditions in Southern Negro schools. Hope pointed out that the Niagara messages would be disseminated more widely if greater efforts were made to secure co-operation from Negro editors and ministers. He also thought that the movement should sponsor educational forums (Rudwick, 1960, p. 103).

It is unclear how many of these committee initiatives and other good ideas were ever acted upon by the larger Niagara organization.

Media coverage of this conference was definitely better (it couldn’t have been much worse) than it had been in 1905. A key invitee to the conference was Mary White Ovington, a frequent correspondent of Du Bois’s, whom Logan (in Ovington, 1947) later called a “Mother of the New Emancipation” (p. i). She came to Harper’s Ferry and covered the second Niagara conference for the New York Evening Post and clearly left impressed with the gathering she witnessed. As she later wrote, “I doubt if a more resolute, intelligent set of men and women were assembling anywhere that summer, filled as summers are with various national conventions” (Ovington, 1947, p. 101). Hers and Du Bois’s working relationship would grow in significance, eventually culminating in the foundation of the N.A.A.C.P.

Judging by the existing accounts, one of the most memorable events from the 1906 conference was a silent, barefoot, candlelight pilgrimage down the steep hill from Storer to the site of the old arsenal where John Brown and a small group of supporters made their fateful stand against slavery. It was followed by an address from Reverend Reverdy C. Ranson that was “as lengthy as it was cathartic, going straight to the heart of the Niagara Movement” (Lewis, 1993, p. 329). But the best was saved for last. Having quietly compiled his thoughts and, in typical Du Boisian fashion, found the right format, the right cadence to effect the desired impact, the Niagara Movement’s first and only general secretary handed a recently typewritten copy of his “Address to the Country” to Lafayette M. Hershaw, a disciple of Du Bois’s who tried to stay under Booker T. Washington’s radar and thus hold onto his clerical position with the Department of Interior. Hershaw then delivered a dramatic reading of the document that, as well as any other, laid out the philosophical foundation on which modern civil rights movements have been built in this country.

Du Bois’s 1906 address is reprinted from TeachingAmericanHistory.org, a project of the Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University.

Address to the Country

The men of the Niagara Movement coming from the toil of the year’s hard work and pausing a moment from the earning of their daily bread turn toward the nation
and again ask in the name of ten million the privilege of a hearing. In the past year
the work of the Negro hater has flourished in the land. Step by step the defenders
of the rights of American citizens have retreated. The work of stealing the black
man’s ballot has progressed and the fifty and more representatives of stolen votes
still sit in the nation’s capital. Discrimination in travel and public accommodation
has so spread that some of our weaker brethren are actually afraid to thunder
against color discrimination as such and are simply whispering for ordinary
decencies.

Against this the Niagara Movement eternally protests. We will not be satisfied to
take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves
every single right that belongs to a freeborn American, political, civil and social;
and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of
America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans.
It is a fight for ideals, lest this, our common fatherland, false to its founding,
become in truth the land of the thief and the home of the Slave—a by-word and a
hissing among the nations for its sounding pretensions and pitiful
accomplishment.

Never before in the modern age has a great and civilized folk threatened to adopt
so cowardly a creed in the treatment of its fellow-citizens born and bred on its
soil. Stripped of verbiage and subterfuge and in its naked nastiness the new
American creed says: Fear to let black men even try to rise lest they become the
equals of the white. And this is the land that professes to follow Jesus Christ. The
blasphemy of such a course is only matched by its cowardice.

In detail our demands are clear and unequivocal. First, we would vote; with the
right to vote goes everything: Freedom, manhood, the honor of your wives, the
chastity of your daughters, the right to work, and the chance to rise, and let no
man listen to those who deny this.

We want full manhood suffrage, and we want it now, henceforth and forever.

Second. We want discrimination in public accommodation to cease. Separation in
railway and street cars, based simply on race and color, is un-American, un-
democratic, and silly. We protest against all such discrimination.

Third. We claim the right of freemen to walk, talk, and be with them that wish to
be with us. No man has a right to choose another man’s friends, and to attempt to
do so is an impudent interference with the most fundamental human privilege.

Fourth. We want the laws enforced against rich as well as poor; against Capitalist
as well as Laborer; against white as well as black. We are not more lawless than
the white race, we are more often arrested, convicted, and mobbed. We want
justice even for criminals and outlaws. We want the Constitution of the country
enforced. We want Congress to take charge of Congressional elections. We want
the Fourteenth amendment carried out to the letter and every State disfranchised in Congress which attempts to disfranchise its rightful voters. We want the Fifteenth amendment enforced and no State allowed to base its franchise simply on color.

The failure of the Republican Party in Congress at the session just closed to redeem its pledge of 1904 with reference to suffrage conditions at the South seems a plain, deliberate, and premeditated breach of promise, and stamps that party as guilty of obtaining votes under false pretense.

Fifth, we want our children educated. The school system in the country districts of the South is a disgrace and in few towns and cities are Negro schools what they ought to be. We want the national government to step in and wipe out illiteracy in the South. Either the United States will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States.

And when we call for education we mean real education. We believe in work. We ourselves are workers, but work is not necessarily education. Education is the development of power and ideal. We want our children trained as intelligent human beings should be, and we will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlings, or simply for the use of other people. They have a right to know, to think, to aspire.

These are some of the chief things which we want. How shall we get them? By voting where we may vote, by persistent, unceasing agitation; by hammering at the truth, by sacrifice and work.

We do not believe in violence, neither in the despised violence of the raid nor the lauded violence of the soldier, nor the barbarous violence of the mob, but we do believe in John Brown, in that incarnate spirit of justice, that hatred of a lie, that willingness to sacrifice money, reputation, and life itself on the altar of right. And here on the scene of John Brown’s martyrdom we reconsecrate ourselves, our honor, our property to the final emancipation of the race which John Brown died to make free.

Our enemies, triumphant for the present, are fighting the stars in their courses. Justice and humanity must prevail. We live to tell these dark brothers of ours—scattered in counsel, wavering and weak—that no bribe of money or notoriety, no promise of wealth or fame, is worth the surrender of a people’s manhood or the loss of a man’s self-respect. We refuse to surrender the leadership of this race to cowards and trucklers. We are men; we will be treated as men. On this rock we have planted our banners. We will never give up, though the trump of doom finds us still fighting.

And we shall win. The past promised it, the present foretells it. Thank God for John Brown! Thank God for Garrison and Douglass! Sumner and Phillips, Nat
Turner and Robert Gould Shaw, and all the hallowed dead who died for freedom! Thank God for all those to-day, few though their voices be, who have not forgotten the divine brotherhood of all men white and black, rich and poor, fortunate and unfortunate.

We appeal to the young men and women of this nation, to those whose nostrils are not yet befouled by greed and snobbery and racial narrowness: Stand up for the right, prove yourselves worthy of your heritage and whether born north or south dare to treat men as men. Cannot the nation that has absorbed ten million foreigners into its political life without catastrophe absorb ten million Negro Americans into that same political life at less cost than their unjust and illegal exclusion will involve?

Courage brothers! The battle for humanity is not lost or losing. All across the skies sit signs of promise. The Slav is raising in his might, the yellow millions are tasting liberty, the black Africans are writhing toward the light, and everywhere the laborer, with ballot in his hand, is voting open the gates of Opportunity and Peace. The morning breaks over blood-stained hills. We must not falter, we may not shrink. Above are the everlasting stars.


In his second autobiography, finished while in his nineties, Du Bois (1968) looks back on the 1906 conference thusly:

[I]nstead of meeting in secret, we met openly at Harper’s Ferry, the scene of John Brown’s raid, and had in significance if not in numbers one of the greatest meetings that American Negroes ever held. We made pilgrimage at dawn bare-footed to the scene of Brown’s martyrdom and we talked some of the plainest English that had been given voice to by black men in America (p. 249).

The Niagara Movement would arguably reach no higher plateau. Harsh realities in the collective lives of African Americans in 1906 brought them back to earth, and Washington’s actions kept them under the gun. Pragmatic responses were needed around every corner, and the Niagara Movement had demonstrated itself to be longer on vision than action, finances or organization. Although it would exist for almost three more years, the omnipresent Du Bois was spread too thin, and as he went, so went Niagara as a movement.

Beginning shortly after Harper’s Ferry, there was talk of mergers among disparate but largely overlapping African American organizations in an attempt to gain strength through unity of effort (and of fundraising). Various schemes were plotted, some in the genuine interest of promoting the goals of the groups, others more focused on consolidating the power of the Tuskegeeans while dispersing that of Du Bois and his ilk (see, e.g., Harlan, 1983 and Rudwick, 1969). It would be the events surrounding three
notable riots and the new alliances that emerged that would prove decisive in the final years of the Niagara Movement.

1907-1909: Riots and rebirth

Even as some of the participants in the 1906 conference were making their way to Harper’s Ferry, an event was taking place outside a military garrison on the outskirts of Brownsville, Texas that would impact all of their lives. Then, a few days later, as they were walking in silent procession down to the scene of John Brown’s raid, President Theodore Roosevelt was taking action in response to the Brownsville incident that would ensure its significance for all African Americans, especially the Niagarites.

For those interested, detailed accounts of the “Brownsville raid” can be found in Weaver (1970) and Nalty (1986). The thumbnail sketch goes something like this: The First Battalion of the 25th Infantry Regiment was one of four congressionally mandated units composed of African American soldiers. At the time of its arrival for training at Fort Brown along the Rio Grande just downriver from Brownsville on July 28, 1906, it consisted of one hundred and seventy Black soldiers under the command of five White officers. A battle-hardened outfit, having seen action in Cuba and the Philippines as well as at home against Plains Indians, they were understandably leery of training with Texas National Guard troops, who had recently shown themselves, up at Fort Riley, Kansas, to be unwilling to serve alongside Black soldiers. Likewise, the townspeople in Brownsville had petitioned all the way to the White House to prevent the First Battalion, 25th Regiment from coming to town and managed quite effectively to convey their feelings to the soldiers upon their arrival.

Shortly after midnight, sixteen days after the Black soldiers had stepped off their train and marched through town to their encampment at Fort Brown, shots rang out in the part of Brownsville adjacent to the fort. Witnesses claimed that a group of soldiers fired approximately one hundred and fifty shots, killing a local bartender as he tried to bar his door and wounding a local policeman. Springfield cartridges and clips were presented sometime after dawn as evidence that the shooters must have been infantrymen. Perfunctory investigations by the commander of Army troops in the Southwest and by the Army Inspector General found no evidence that could point to any soldier but concluded that they must have entered into a “conspiracy of silence” to protect each other.

Armed with nothing that could come close to court-martialing any of the soldiers, President Roosevelt took the rash step of relying on sketchy precedent from General Robert E. Lee and administratively separated every soldier in the three companies (except those on leave or temporary duty elsewhere), under dishonorable circumstances, effectively barring them for life from further military or government service or from receiving their pensions. Naturally, with congressional elections imminent, the President withheld publicizing his decision until November 8th, the day after the Party of Lincoln would enjoy the fruits of its overwhelming support from African Americans.

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4 This was an outfit containing many men with considerable time in service. At least one non-commissioned officer had more than twenty-five years in the Army.
In response, Senator, Civil War veteran, and possible contender for the 1908 Republican presidential nomination, Joseph B. Foraker arranged for a Senate Military Affairs Committee investigation of the incident and its handling. A five-to-four majority ended up supporting the President, but history (not to mention rudimentary forensics and ballistics examinations conducted at the time for the committee) has proven the minority’s case to be more compelling. Unfortunately, it took until 1972 for a U.S. President to reverse the findings. By that point, only one soldier from the First Battalion, 25th Regiment was still alive and able to collect a lump sum payment of $25,000 and receive treatment at a VA hospital.

The aftermath was tumultuous. Lewis considers the Brownsville raid the absolute low point for African Americans. The Niagara Movement engaged in a vigorous letter writing and protest campaign, while “[f]rom across the land imprecations were hurled at the President and [Booker T. Washington]” (1993, p. 332). Washington was on the receiving end because he had met with Roosevelt just prior to the announcement of the decision and could only muster a public expression of “disappointment” (although his letters indicate he did make some effort to dissuade the President). Meanwhile, the New York World was referring to the President’s handling of Brownsville as “executive lynch law” (quoted in Harlan, 1993, p. 311). Perhaps the best gage of the strong feelings felt by many African Americans can be seen in the run-up to the 1908 presidential elections. While Booker T. Washington lobbied for Black support of Roosevelt’s hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft, Du Bois could not forgive the man who was Secretary of War during Brownsville and instead threw his public support behind William Jennings Bryan, a notorious Dixie Democrat. As Du Bois would write in Trotter’s Guardian newspaper, “[I]f between the two parties who stand on identically the same platform you can prefer the party who perpetuated Brownsville, well and good! But I shall vote for Bryan” (quoted in Lewis, 1993, p. 341).

Racially motivated riots large and small would continue to scar the social landscape during the last years of the Niagara Movement. The two of perhaps greatest significance occurred in Atlanta in September, 1906 and in Springfield, Illinois in August, 1908. Stirred up by what had, by then, become the usual catalyst of mob rage directed at African Americans – namely, outrageous press accounts of alleged assaults perpetrated by Black men against White women – the Atlanta riot had a powerful class struggle element to it as well, occurring in what was considered the most tolerant and cosmopolitan city in the South.

The Atlanta riot marked a cruel bookend to the Atlanta Compromise of 1895. Whereas Washington had preached that the development of useful manual labor skills would help Blacks gain respect and tolerance from Whites, the 1906 riot demonstrated that attitudes had not changed, and in fact – in a period marked by the replacement of Bourbon gentry with a fabulously wealthy industrial elite – skilled Black labor was seen by White workers as a growing economic threat. Even after the riot, which had seen an estimated mob of ten thousand Whites descend with violence on every African American within reach, Washington sought to praise the way in which community leaders were...
coming together. Du Bois and the Niagara Movement engaged the Tuskegee position and the issue as best they could, in part through their new organ, *The New Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line*. But it was to be the painful episode “up north” in Springfield, Illinois that would serve to bring together sufficient forces to effect real change.

A third Niagara conference was held in August of 1907, this time at Boston’s Faneuil Hall. It had the largest attendance yet – around eight hundred – representing the now thirty-four state chapters, but the movement had less than $400 in its accounts and no central headquarters to coordinate its activities. A dispute between Du Bois and Trotter, the central figures in the movement from the beginning, was widening, and by the time of the movement’s final meeting the next year in Oberlin, Ohio, Du Bois’s words signaled the need for a new direction. As Lewis (1993) sums it up:

Du Bois and the Niagarites had tried to do their best to present an alternative to the Tuskegee Machine and to become an effective force against racial discrimination, but in terms of actual accomplishment they had largely preached to the converted. The real task lay perilously ahead (p. 342).

Most historians agree that the Springfield riot of 1908 would be the catalyst that shocked the non-converted into action.

As had become customary, the trigger for the violence was the false report of a White woman having been raped by a Black man. A mob gathered to carry out its form of justice, but when they couldn’t get their hands on the (falsely) accused man sitting in the jailhouse, they lynched two other Black men instead, murdered a total of six and then proceeded to burn numerous homes belonging to Black families before deciding generally to rid the entire city of its African American population, driving out more than two thousand. This was Illinois; this was the north; this was the former home of Abraham Lincoln.

William English Walling and his wife, Anna Strunsky, traveled to Springfield to witness the immediate aftermath of the riot and talk to people on the ground. Based on this research, Walling would write “The Race War in the North” for the September 3, 1908 issue of the *Independent*. Published less than twenty-four hours after the end of the fourth and final Niagara conference, it was “one of the more important articles in the history of American magazines” (Logan, 1954, p. 352). Walling argued that the events in Springfield, had they happened there thirty years prior, would have evoked shame and outrage among locals as well as many across the nation. But by 1908, southern attitudes toward issues of race had successfully migrated north, and the spirit of the abolitionists had all but extinguished. He finishes with a question: “Yet who realizes the seriousness of the situation, and what large and powerful body of citizens is ready to come to their aid?” (quoted in Lewis, 1993, p. 389).

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5 See Ashton (2001) for a wonderful analysis of the under-appreciated literary, historical and political significance of *Horizon*, which she says “arose…as a direct response to the Atlanta riots of 1906.”
The final, and as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, best remembered chapter of the Niagara Movement is how its organized and motivated membership, still under the leadership of W. E. B. Du Bois, retired their groundbreaking efforts – begun only four years prior at a small hotel in Fort Erie, Ontario – and merged, unofficially, with a converted cadre of White liberals to form that very “powerful body of citizens” that Walling sought. On February 12, 1909, the one-hundredth anniversary of Lincoln’s birth, what would come to be named the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was born. But that is a story oft told that continues to be written today.

Conclusion

*Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois at the end of the [nineteenth] century set off an historic divide regarding economic and social independence of black Americans that is still the core of the debate over black progress.*

Edward J. Blakely & Leslie Small, 1995/96

What can be extracted from the above quote is this: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Niagara Movement served, arguably, its most significant service by singing a dissonant tune, by being the fly in an ointment that was spread thick and wide by Booker Washington across a welcoming White establishment.

Would an alliance, or at least a détente, have advanced African Americans farther, faster? Was Washington’s model for Black progress – take what’s given, work on self-improvement and hope to be deemed worthy of equal recognition – destined, given sufficient time, to succeed? It is impossible to answer in either case. Harlan (1993, p. 86-93) recounts the extensive network of spies and intrigue employed by Washington over the life of the Niagara Movement – sometimes assigning desperate men who were given every expectation of patronage in return for their services – in an effort to “keep the Niagara Movement weak and small.” He points to the energy spent by both factions fighting each other, rather than working towards the “meliorative goals that each professed,” as a principal failure on both sides (p. 85).

Amazingly, these groups remain encamped today in certain circles. A casual media search reveals that papers like the *New York Beacon*, self-proclaimed as “New York City’s Finest African-American Newspaper,” are still, in this day and age (at least as recently as 1996), running commentaries that take Du Bois and the Niagara Movement to task for their part in dismantling “Professor Washington” and his industrial arts educational model for Blacks (Craft, 1996) or for enabling Korean merchants to get the economic upper hand in African American neighborhoods (Richards, 1996). Bill

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*Coombs (1972) points out that there wasn’t universal agreement. While Du Bois would be named to the N.A.A.C.P.’s board and hired as its director of publicity and research, “[m]ost blacks and whites at the time believed that the N.A.A.C.P. was irresponsible for including so many of the members of the Niagara Movement in its membership. Monroe Trotter and a few others, however, held that an interracial organization such as the N.A.A.C.P. could not be trusted to take a strong enough stand on important issues, and they refused to cooperate with it” (p. 104).*
Bradberry, on the other hand, in columns for the *Niagara Falls Reporter*, proclaims that the words in Du Bois’s Address to the Country “spoken nearly 100 years ago, could just as well have been written this morning. They are just as relevant today as they were then” (2002), adding that “[i]t is time to convene the New Niagara Movement” (n.d.)

Even when not taking sides, Dinesh D’Souza, commenting in the *Wall Street Journal* on the direction of civil rights in America, writes that “[a] debate whose roots go back to the early part of the century, to the confrontation between two titans of black progress, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, now needs to be resumed” (1992, p. A1).

It is clear that the Niagara Movement – its proclamations and ideals – resonated with enough people to stir further action that has had a significant and lasting effect and remains a rallying, motivating and controversial touchstone today. Anthony Asadullah Samad, commenting a couple of years ago in *The Black World Today*, observes that “America is in the midst of its second post-reconstruction” – one, he adds, just as the Niagarites had seen a century ago, that has strong global-colonial aspects – and hopes that the recently held State of the Black World Conference “will be our generation’s Niagara movement that will bring forth new vision and new leadership for the advancement of the global black race” (2001). A story appearing in the *Washington Post* on March 1, 2004 recounts the continuing struggle of the descendants of the Army’s first Black chaplain, who was dishonorably discharged under highly questionable (read: racially motivated) circumstances, a few years before Brownsville and right at the time Washington and Du Bois were ratcheting up the heat in their public debate. A commemoration, including the likes of Du Bois’s granddaughter, Dr. Du Bois Williams, his biographer, Dr. David Levering Lewis, and Dr. Henry Louis Gates, chair of Harvard University’s Department of Afro-American Studies, was held in 1996 at the site of the former Storer College to celebrate 90 years since the second Niagara Movement conference. A symposium, “The Niagara Movement Revisited, 1905-2005,” is planned for summer, 2005 in Buffalo, New York. A play, *The Winter of our Discontent*, had its world premier in Philadelphia in 2001. Fancifully set in Booker T. Washington’s office at Hampton College in 1911, it depicts a fictionalized meeting between Du Bois and Washington and dedicates the entire script to a dramatized debate between the two titans. Clearly, the work of the Niagarites has relevance today.

Yes, the Niagara Movement was that hard nucleus about which the N.A.A.C.P. formed, but it is also something of significance that has been forgotten by too many and is clearly worthy of renewed attention one hundred years after its founding. It is my sincere hope that this paper will in some way start discussions, pique interests and send people forward to chase down one or two of the many resources cited throughout to learn more about the untold story of the Niagara Movement and, more importantly, to engage some of the issues that remain relevant a century later.
References


