

**Echoes from the Annual Convention of Northeastern Federation of Colored Women's
Clubs**

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What is a woman's club? The fabric of a dream
Touched with an altar coal and made alive,
Instinct with hope for those who toil and strive,
And wait to catch that joyous day's first gleam
That ushers in a better, freer age,
When right for one shall be for all the right;
When all together in life's moil and fight,
The war for right and truth shall bravely wage.¹

The annual convention of the Northeastern Federation of Women's Clubs, beginning August 12, 1903, was held three days in the Dixwell Avenue Congregational Church, New Haven, Conn., with its usual auspiciousness. The president, Miss Roberta J. Dunbar of Providence, occupied the chair. The forty-five clubs in the federation were represented by ninety-two delegates and numerous members from different clubs augmented the great crowd of visitors and taxed the seating capacity of the church to its utmost. Many found standing room only during their attendance at the convention, all of which proves how earnest and sustained is

¹ Much of this article, including this poem and other citations, appeared in “Club Life Among Colored Women,” the ninth installment of *Famous Women of the Negro Race*. See Pauline E. Hopkins, *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline E. Hopkins*, ed. Ira Dworkin (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 178-184.

the interest of all communities in the club movement for women. The press of New Haven are unanimous in declaring that

the tact and high order of executive ability displayed by the ladies in their proceedings and rules of order have never been surpassed by any similar gathering in the city. The excellency of their work is well worthy of and should receive the hearty endorsement of the people both at home and at large. There were no better appearing visitors to the City of Elms than the officers and delegates to the federation. There has never been a greater display of learning, culture and refinement, coupled with elegant costumes, than was demonstrated by these people. They were given the freedom of the city and Yale University.

All of the above eulogy is pleasant reading but ancient history to the colored women there assembled. The culture of the Afro-American woman is a surprise which never grows old to the Anglo-Saxon, because he is taught that incapacity and immorality are to be the eternal characteristics of the female Afro-American. It is not the fault of the Caucasian that we are making his words and wishes false as the rotten hearts from which they spring. All thanks to that God who watches the sparrows fall that our women are proving the salvation of the race in America. Truehearted, fond wives are they to their husbands, and faithful, loving mothers to their daughters and sons who rise up and call them blessed.

No general meeting was held on Wednesday, the day being given up to the private meetings of the Executive Board. In the evening a reception was held for the chance of social intercourse, and an elaborate musical and literary program was rendered.

The program was as follows: Chorus by Twentieth Century Club; address, G. H. Johnson; reading, Mrs. W. H. Hickman. The vocal solo by Miss Pearl Brown completely fascinated the

audience, and she was compelled to answer an encore. Then followed piano solo, Mrs. Alodene Peters; selection from Dunbar, Mrs. Whitby; piano solo, Maurice Porter. William Pickens, Yale's present orator, made a very forcible and interesting address on "The Relation of Young People to the Church." Rev. E. F. Goin, pastor, closed the exercises by welcoming the delegates on behalf of the church. The profusion of palms and cut flowers about the altar presented a magnificent aspect. Refreshments were served in the chapel to about four hundred people free.

On Thursday, at 9:30 A. M. the convention was called to order by the president. The general secretary, Miss Mary E. Jackson, read the minutes of the executive board. Mrs. H. S. Smith of Boston, chairman of executive board, presided over the meeting. Rules to govern juvenile clubs were adopted. The organizer, Miss Elizabeth C. Carter of New Bedford, reported the admittance of fourteen new clubs and the re-organization of one. A letter from the secretary of the National Association of Colored Women, granting the application of the Northeastern Federation for admittance was read by Miss Jackson. It was voted to hold next year's convention in Worcester, Mass. After some minor matters, Mrs. John W. Ross, Jr., president of the Twentieth Century Club of this city, made the welcome address in behalf of the club. She bade the delegates welcome to the city, churches, Goffe Street Branch of the Y. M. C. A. and to Yale University. Mrs. M. Cravat Simpson, president of the Woman's Era Club, Boston, responded in a telling speech. She dwelt at length on the horrors and atrocities of lynching, which appealed to the very hearts of the people. Miss Elizabeth C. Carter gave a full resume of her year's work relative to the organizing of new clubs, showing the remarkable results accomplished.

At the afternoon session forty-two clubs were represented. After a piano solo by Miss Minnie Felton of the Woman's Loyal Union, New Bedford, a memorial service was conducted by Mrs. Julia O. Henson of Harriet Tubman W. C. T. U., Boston. Reports of Massachusetts clubs

and reports of committees were rendered. A solo of Mrs. Robert A. Jackson of the Woman's Twentieth Century Club, was encored. The evening session opened at 8 P. M., with a piano solo by Mrs. Alodene Peters of the Twentieth Century Club. The annual address of the president, Miss Dunbar, was undoubtedly her greatest effort, for she swayed the big audience at will. Rev. Florence Randolph of Jersey City read a paper on "Heredity," which created much favorable comment. The feature of the evening session was the paper "The Franchise," by Miss Hattie Cook, Norwich, Conn., Louise De Mortie Club. The discussion was opened by Miss G. Gunnes, Providence, R. I., New Century Club, followed by Miss M. Lyons of New York. Miss Cook is a teacher in a mixed school, and Miss Lyons is a highly cultured woman of great New York. She closed the discussion, and her remarks were so eloquent and something so unusual among even highly cultured women that she took her audience by storm.

After a selection by Miss Inez Scott of the Rose of New England League, Norwich, Conn., Miss Ada Gross, Boston, read a paper on "Africa."²

Friday's morning session was private, as the order of the day called for the election of officers and report of the treasurer, Mrs. Mary H. Dickerson of Newport as follows: Amount in general treasury, \$213.77; disbursements, \$85.28; Northfield fund, \$299.70. After a strong contest for president Miss Dunbar was re-elected by a handsome majority. The following are the officers: Honorary president, Mrs. Mary H. Dickerson, Newport, R. I.; president, Miss Roberta J. Dunbar, Providence, R. I.; first vice-president, Mrs. A. W. Wiley, Brooklyn, N. Y.; second vice-president, Miss E. J. Cook, Norwich, Conn.; third vice-president, Mrs. Byron Gunner, Newport, R. I.; fourth vice-president, Mrs. M. C. Simpson, Chelsea, Mass.; fifth vice-president, Mrs.

² The Saturday, August 15, 1903, Boston Guardian reported on the Thursday meeting of the Northeastern Federation of Women's Clubs. The article concluded, "In our next the Friday's session and echoes of the convention will be published," which itself echoes the title of Hopkins's essay. See "In Annual Convention," Boston Guardian, August 15, 1903, 1.

Corbin Smith, Portland, Me.; general secretary, Miss Mary E. Jackson, Providence. R. I.; assistant secretary, Miss Ella Wilson, Worcester, Mass.; treasurer, Mrs. John W. Ross, Jr., New Haven, Conn.; organizer, Miss Elizabeth C. Carter, New Bedford, Mass.; superintendent juvenile department, Mrs. O. W. Bush, Cambridge, Mass.

As the result of the stirring response made to the address of welcome by Mrs. Simpson, which we give in full in a separate article, the following telegram was sent to President Roosevelt by the Federation:

To the President of the United States, Oyster Bay, L. I.:

The Northeastern Federation of Women's Clubs, now assembled at New Haven, Conn., send to you grateful appreciation for your impartial dealings with questions pertaining to the protection of our race.

Roberta J. Dunbar, President.

Mary E. Jackson, Secretary.

The afternoon session was devoted to juvenile work. A very deep and interesting paper, entitled "Child Culture in the Home," was read by Mrs. Olivia W. Bush. There was also a paper on "Child Culture in the School," by Mrs. Byron Gunner, Newport. The chorus, "Summer Fancies," opened the evening session and was effectively chanted by the Twentieth Century Club. After reports of committees on courtesies, resolutions, introduction of officers for ensuing year, and appointment of committees, the session was closed by singing "God be With Us till We Meet Again."

While women have, by individual effort, done much for the progress of society, and the names of illustrious women adorn the pages of literature, art and science; and while their work of

moral education has been displayed in the life of schools and colleges, and in the province of loving service upon the battlefield and in the hospitals, yet it was felt that these personal efforts could best be centralized by co-operation in the form of clubs, thus giving to causes dear and vital to humanity the valuable aid of organized intelligence.

In 1868 the first movement in the great innovation was made, and shortly after "Sorosis" was formed in New York, mothered by Mrs. Croly (Jennie June), and the "New England Woman's Club" of Boston, with Mrs. Caroline M. Severance as the fostering power that gave being to this, then remarkable organization.

New England women of any race are quick to catch inspiration from environment, and the fever of the club life soon infected the leading women of color in Massachusetts. Touched by a live coal from the altar of Progress, in 1873 the "Woman's Era Club" was formed.

The club took its name from a paper called the "Woman's Era." This publication was devoted to the interests of colored women, and Mrs. Ruffin was its editor. It was because of the work done by this paper that the first organization of colored women was formed in 1873, and a meeting held in Boston, and the following year in Washington.

This club, which is the only colored club in Massachusetts belonging to the State Federation, was started in this way:

Mrs. Ruffin was a member of the New England Woman's Club, whose president was Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, and which is claimed to antedate the so-called "Mother of Clubs," Sorosis, of New York. Occasionally Mrs. Ruffin would invite friends to attend these meetings, and thus interest was aroused which resulted in a formation of a new club, which was not intended necessarily to be a colored club, as it had three or four white women as members.

The club now has one hundred members. Two meetings are held each month, one of which is devoted to business and the other to literary pursuits, lectures and similar educational features. The club headquarters are in the Blue Room of Tremont Temple. Lucy Stone spoke to the club at the last meeting she ever addressed, and her words, "Help to make the world better," have been taken as the club motto.

The object of the club as laid down in its constitution is:

"The furtherance of the interests of the race generally and of our women particularly; not only through the collecting of facts which shall show our true position to the world, by endeavoring to create sentiment against the proscription under which we suffer, and by co-operating to aid in our general advancement, but also to awaken in our women an active interest in the events of the day, and giving to them through such an organization an opportunity of hearing and participating in the discussion of current topics."

The success of the club movement among colored women has been phenomenal. The National Federation of Afro-American Women, known now as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, was organized in Boston, July 31, 1895, under the auspices of the Woman's Era. The first convention was held at Washington, D. C., July 20, 21 and 22, 1896, at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. This great Association is now of powerful growth, adding yearly to its roll of membership Federations from every Southern state. Soon after this the Northeastern Federation sprang into life.

Many events have contributed to keeping the clubs in the public eye; notably the Baker episode and the opposition of Afro-American women to Miss Lillian Clayton Jewett posing as the Harriet Beecher Stowe of the race.

So, through the example of a few public-spirited women, the Negro woman has become ubiquitous in club life, overflowing into all the avenues of self-help that are adopted by her white sisters as a means to the end of rising herself, and "lifting others as she climbs."

This short resume brings us to the high-water mark of the race battle in women's clubs--the Sixth Biennial of the General Federation of Women's Clubs at Los Angeles, Cal., with Mrs. Lowe of Georgia as the unswerving foe of her black sister, and the remarkable rulings of that most remarkable convention in an effort to degrade the Afro-American woman. There we saw again the sad picture of Northern compromise, and, too, the inspiring picture of the God-given champion in the person of Mrs. Kate Lyon Brown of Waltham, Mass.

There New York women placed themselves on record in the words of their president:

"The Civil War is past; the old wounds have been healed; the North and the South have been reunited, and we cannot afford to take any action that will lead to more bitter feeling. The South is represented strongly in the Federation, and the effect on those members is obvious if colored women are admitted on a social equality with white members. We must not, and I feel that the delegates will not, do anything that threatens disruption of the Federation, of which we are all so proud."

All this was but renewing the old conflict. Thrice before in the history of our country the "spaniel" North has grovelled before the South, but, thank God, the time came when the old New England spirit of Puritanism arose and shook its mane and flung off the shackles of conservatism. So it will be again. Where we have found one Kate Lyon Brown, we shall find more, because God lives, and we trust Him.

The claim of the North to govern has been in the past that civilization here is nobler than in the South, and we believe this to be still an axiom.

There has always been an element at the North that never had a logic, that knew neither white nor black; and has always been too conservative to recognize its duties. This is true of the pulpit and civil life.

Freedom and serfdom are at war today. The perpetuity of the Union demands a right settlement of this struggle. The Missouri compromise was the first protest of civilization against barbarism. It was unsuccessful, but the South did not succeed in killing the spirit of Freedom there aroused.

We grant that the Southern woman has given us a terrible blow, and in a vital part, because woman is the natural social leader; she is responsible in great measure for society's deeds; but we have known for years where to seek our enemy; it is not the man so much as the environments of his social system. Granted that the conditions are hard for a certain class of Southern white women; but the results of profligacy are the same in any case, no matter whether white or black are the partners. Certainly the rapid life of society everywhere at present, among white and black, is not suggestive of absolute purity, and the black is no worse than his environment; he follows the fashions as set by his white superior.

But if this thing be true, and pity 'tis, 'tis true, it is but the result of conditions forced upon a helpless people, and not their choice; we reap the whirlwind from sowing the wind.

Meanwhile, tears and sorrow and heart-burning are the Southern white woman's portion, and like Sarah of old she wreaks her vengeance on helpless Hagar. Club life has but rendered her disposition more intolerable toward the victims of her husband's and son's evil passions.

Spite of these sad short-comings, let us hope. Never until we welcome the Negro, the foreigner, all races, as equals, and welded together in a common nationality, shall we deserve prosperity and peace.

We hope the time is not far distant when the women of African descent will meet in a General Federation, and pray, with unwavering trust in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man:

"Lord, from the four corners of the world we have come to this convention, as representing the homes of the world. It is to these homes the effects of this meeting, for good or for evil, will go. May many homes be made stronger and sweeter, may many crooked ways be made straight, by what we shall do and say here."