

# African Americans

and the 1892

## REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION, MINNEAPOLIS

IRIC NATHANSON

Throughout the spring of 1892, Minneapolis worked feverishly to prepare for the biggest, most spectacular event in its short history. Civic leaders wanted their booming metropolis to look its very best so it would shine in the national spotlight when the city's Exposition Building hosted the Republican National Convention in June. Downtown would soon resemble a "mammoth peach orchard in full blossom," the *Minneapolis Journal* reported,

as business leaders began decorating their storefronts with colorful flags and bunting to welcome the throngs of conventioners. "The people of Minneapolis are now beginning to fully appreciate the importance and magnitude of the event for which they labored so industriously. The entire populace seems to have fully entered into the spirit of the occasion," the *Minneapolis Tribune* noted.<sup>1</sup>



But not everyone was celebrating as the convention's opening day drew closer. In the city's small African American community, the mood was somber as members participated in a national day of fasting and prayer on May 31. The event had been organized to draw attention to the shameful atrocities inflicted on black people, mainly in the South. Lynching would reach its high point in America in 1892, with the reported murders of 161 African Americans at the hands of white mobs.<sup>2</sup>

This disturbing issue would inject itself into an otherwise typical convention preoccupied with political hoopla and factional bickering. The main event, balloting for the presidential nominee, was scheduled for June 10, the final day of the weeklong conclave. Many delegates had come to Minneapolis simmering with dissatisfaction at the lackluster performance of the incumbent Republican president, Benjamin Harrison, and some wanted to deny him nomination for a second term. A bloc of anti-Harrison delegates rallied around Secretary of State James G. Blaine, who was considered more charismatic and dynamic, although he had lost the 1884 presidential election to Grover Cleveland. Blaine's name was placed in nomination at the Minneapolis convention, even though he never openly encouraged the "dump Harrison" movement. In the end, Harrison easily won renomination on the first ballot. He would go on to be defeated by Cleveland that fall.

Even as Jim Crow legislation was tightening its hold on the South, the 116 black delegates to the Minneapolis convention—about 13 percent of the full body—still considered themselves players in Republican Party politics, and they worked diligently to maximize their political influence.

The local press reported regularly, if condescendingly, on their activities, in the process revealing how the Twin Cities African American community supported the delegates. At one point during the five-day event, some African American leaders believed that they might be able to constitute the balance of power between competing blocs. While their efforts to organize an African American swing vote were ultimately unsuccessful, even the expectation of potential influence would become unthinkable at later conventions, where African Americans were shut out of the political process entirely.<sup>3</sup>

**O**n May 31, Minneapolis's African American community had gained public attention for the cause of civil rights when more than 1,000 people packed into the city's Labor Temple on South Fourth Street for a rally to conclude the national day of prayer. "It seemed as though the entire colored population of the city had turned out to protest against the crimes against the colored people

in the South," the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported. William R. Morris, a local black attorney and community leader, delivered the principal address. "For more than a quarter of a century," Morris declared angrily

the negroes of this country have been at the mercy of certain white citizens, who, goaded by an insane desire for blood and unprovoked prejudice and hatred . . . have ruthlessly and openly, seemingly without fear of God or man, slaughtered, butchered and murdered them.

In fact, the American people have become so accustomed to these open violations of law that scarcely a passing notice is given them. That such an offense as the

*Iric Nathanson is writing a history of Minneapolis in the twentieth century for the Minnesota Historical Society Press. His article, "The Oppenheimer Affair: Red Scare in Minnesota," appeared in the Spring 2007 issue of Minnesota History.*





butchery of citizens should be allowed to go unpunished . . . is simply incomprehensible.<sup>4</sup>

Following Morris's address, which the *Tribune* reprinted in its entirety, rallygoers adopted numerous resolutions. One proclaimed:

We the Afro-Americans of Minneapolis, in mass meeting assembled,

join with Afro-Americans of the United States and implore of the president, the honorable senate, our honorable representatives in congress to both enact and enforce the law that justice may be fairly dealt our brethren in distress.

In view of the recent heinous outrages that have been perpetrated upon the negroes of the southern states, we do most ear-

nestly call upon all law abiding citizens the country over to assist us in our efforts to put a stop to them.

After the rally, another local paper took up the cause of civil rights but not without a note of ambiguity. In early June the *Minneapolis Times* editorialized, "That in communities where all the machinery and safeguards of law are in force, poor creatures are hurled to doom with no opportunity to be heard in their own defense, is an outrage against civilization and humanity." But the Democratic-leaning *Times* used its editorial mainly to castigate the Republican Party for feigning sympathy for "the colored man" while doing little to deal with his plight.

When a republican organ calls for political justice for the colored man it invites exposure of the utter hypocrisy of the attitudes of its party toward the negro. The republicans have for thirty years been petting and coddling the negro for political purposes. They began by promising him "forty acres and a mule," a promise in connection with which they graciously took charge of his small savings, and kept them so well that, ignorant and confident as he was, he learned something of the lesson that it costs dearly to be coddled.<sup>5</sup>

**A**s the delegates and their retinues began pouring into the city's Union Station during the days leading up to the convention, prominent African American political leaders received their share of media attention. The *Minneapolis Times* reported on the arrival of John R. Lynch, a Mississippi delegate who had been chairman of the Republican convention



Thomas Nast cartoon, which covered page one of the *Twin Cities'* black newspaper, June 4, 1892, when convention delegates began arriving



Mississippi delegate John R. Lynch

that nominated Blaine for president in 1884. Lynch told the *Times* that he thought all 18 delegates from Mississippi would support the renomination of Harrison. When asked, “Do you predict that Harrison will be renominated?” he replied, “I do not predict that he will be renominated, but I hope that he will.”<sup>6</sup>



John M. Langston of Virginia: delegate, former congressman, and skilled orator

Meanwhile, black Republicans hoped that another African American, John M. Langston, a Virginia delegate, former congressman, and skilled orator, would be named temporary chairman of the Minneapolis convention. Langston was widely rumored to be the front-runner, but he undercut his own efforts to gain the prestigious post when he declared his unequivocal support for Blaine. In a Chicago interview, the Virginia delegate maintained, “No one but Blaine was a friend of the black man in the South.” Langston “came so close to abusing Harrison that the [Repub-

lican National] committeemen felt it unwise to select a biased man for such an important place,” the *Minneapolis Tribune* reported.<sup>7</sup>

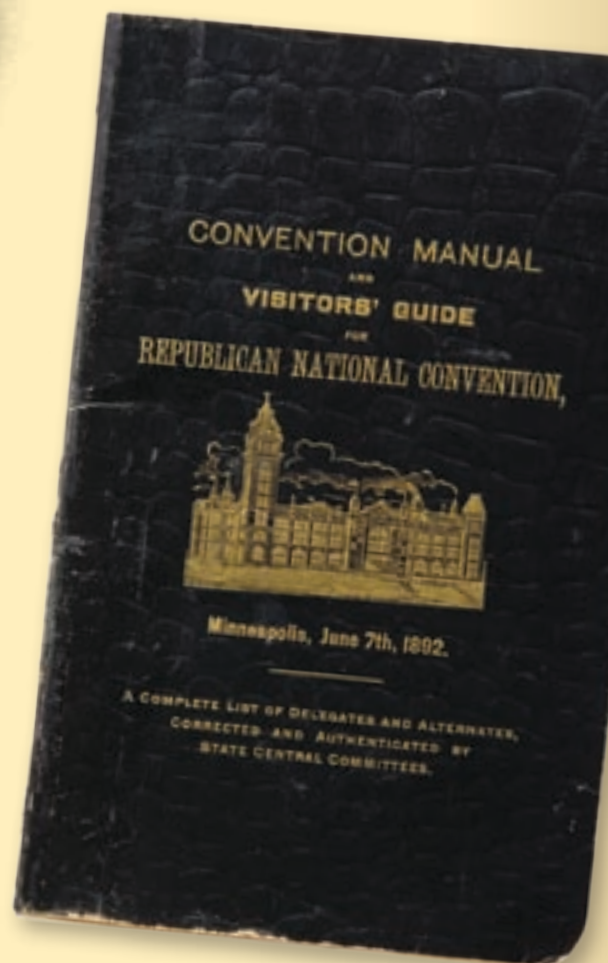
The convention attracted hordes of political operatives and hangers-on who lacked delegate credentials but came to town to be a part of the action. They included black politician and educator Thomas E. Miller, a former U.S. congressman from South Carolina, who told political reporters in Washington, D.C., that he was going to lead a contingent of 700 “colored men” to Minneapolis to “make things lively.”<sup>8</sup>



Frederick Douglass, about 1885

One of the most prominent nondelegates in Minneapolis during convention week was the noted abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had come to town to participate in a suffrage rally with Susan B. Anthony. Douglass received an enthusiastic welcome when he checked into the city’s leading convention hotel, the West, on June 7. “For several hours, he was surrounded by a great crowd eager to stroke the old man’s head,” the *Tribune* reported in a less-than respectful tone. “After standing for an hour, he excused himself for greeting his friends sitting, saying as he took his seat, ‘I don’t belong to the rising generation.’”<sup>9</sup>

Douglass was not the only African American to mix freely with white conventioners at the West Hotel, the political gathering’s social center. At one point, a black man buttonholed Republican National Committee chairman and Blaine supporter, James S. Clarkson, in the lobby as Clarkson tried to make his way to the Exposition Building. The man wanted to know more about the startling news from Washington that Blaine had suddenly resigned his post as Secretary of State. “Call up and see me this afternoon,” the chairman told the unnamed but persistent questioner. “I’ll be hanged if I know,” Clarkson disingenuously concluded, struggling to free himself and proceed to the convention.<sup>10</sup>





But racial harmony was not the watchword all over town during convention week. At the Nicollet House on Washington Avenue, a “colored man” from Louisiana got in a fight with a “long-haired lily white” from Mississippi, according to a report in the *Journal*. “The latter informed the former that if he had him in Mississippi he would make him black his boots or take a dose of cold lead. The Louisianan promptly hit the gentleman from Mississippi a sounding whack with a cane, and there was a row. For a few moments it seemed as if the thing was going to be general, but someone pulled the colored man off and the crowd sought new excitement.”

**O**n the Sunday before the convention opened, black delegates and their supporters gathered at Bethesda Baptist Church on South Eighth Street to discuss the crisis facing African Americans in the

southern states. Andrew Hillier, a University of Minnesota graduate and resident of Washington, D.C., chaired the meeting. Hillier told the group that he was pleased to see in the audience so many white people who might not be fully familiar with conditions in the South. He then declared, as paraphrased in the newspaper: “There was only one question to be placed in the [Republican Party] platform to be formulated this week, which would be of serious import to the colored people of the United States, and that was to have the right of American citizenship extended to all persons.”<sup>11</sup>

The work of the convention began in earnest after opening day—Monday, June 6. Many African American delegates soon grew increasingly uneasy as reports reached them about credential disputes between multi-racial and all-white delegations from certain southern states. Their uneasiness only intensified when they learned that the credentials



*Pomp and circumstance: delegates parading up Nicollet Avenue, 1892*

committee had resolved a key dispute by seating an all-white Alabama delegation in place of a mixed delegation of blacks and whites.<sup>12</sup>

“There is trouble with the colored delegates,” the *Minneapolis Times* reported. “They are talking the matter over among themselves and think that they have the balance of power in this convention. . . . There was lots of talk about the way the colored delegates were being ignored by the convention, and some thought the sentiment was to freeze them out entirely.”

The *Times* went on to tell of a “mass meeting” of “Afro-Americans of the northwest,” which drew up several resolutions to be sent to the credentials committee protesting “the seating of the so called ‘Lily White’ republicans” from Alabama. “Resolved, that if the republican national convention recognizes a white man’s republican party, it will meet with a strong protest from 4,000,000 of Afro-American voters of the United States.” The article then reported about a possible convention walkout by black delegates. “This rumor was verified by several parties, who said that there was a danger of some such move . . . and that a plan was on foot to have all the colored delegates unite on some one man.”

Meanwhile, the *Minneapolis Journal* commented on the leverage that the African American delegates could exert if they came together in a single voting bloc. “The 100 odd colored delegates to the . . . convention clearly hold the balance of power. If they vote as a unit, they may be able to name the nominee.”<sup>13</sup>

On June 8 black delegates caucused to determine the best course of action to follow during the remaining days of the convention. “There was an undercurrent in favor of dropping

both Blaine and Harrison,” the *Journal* reported. Some caucus attendees urged their fellow black delegates to coalesce around a dark-horse candidate, former Michigan Governor

Russell A. Alger. But unity proved to be elusive, with prior commitments tying some delegates to candidates that they did not enthusiastically support. In the end, the boomlet for Alger never gained momentum, and his name was not put in nomination.

The black delegates may have been split on their candidate preferences, but they did come together to endorse a strongly worded resolution that they submitted to the convention’s platform committee. It called upon the party to guarantee the protection of “lives, liberty, and rights” of all citizens. In part, the resolution read: “The Republican Party regards the apparent increase of lynchings of Afro-Americans in the South with great alarm. Lynch law is the shame, disgrace and horror of the civilization of our common country and the Republican Party pledges itself to do all in its power to wipe the foul blot from the escutcheon of the nation.”

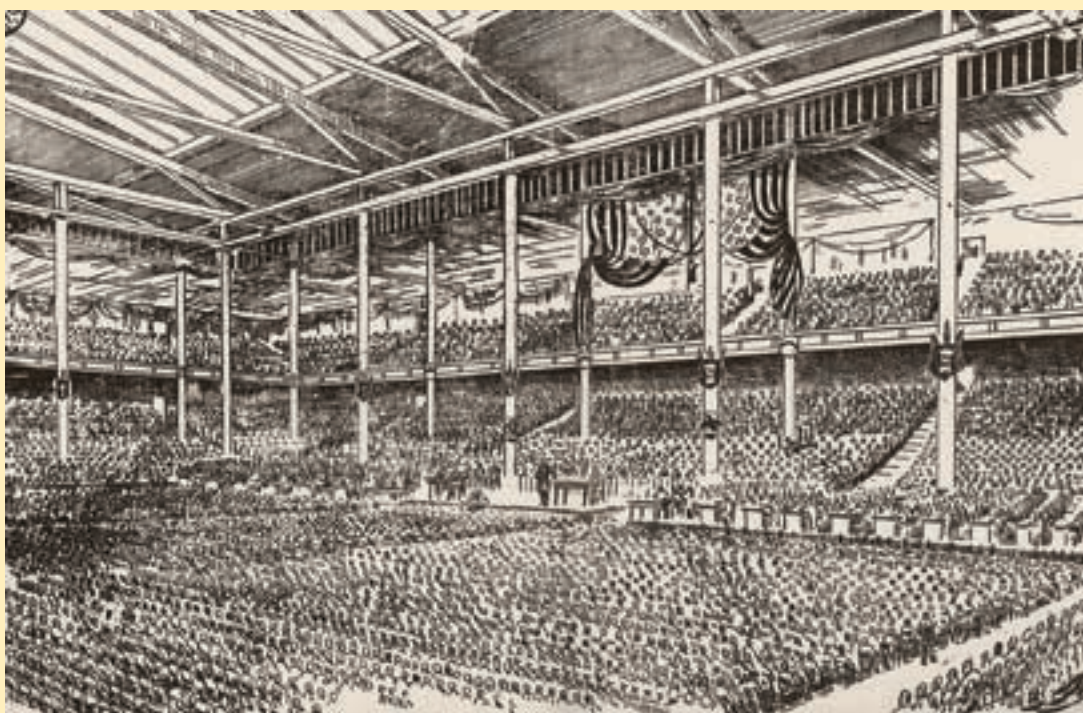
**B**lack delegates left Minneapolis unsure of their future role in the Republican Party. Their only solace was a rather tepid and indirect condemnation of lynching written into the party platform: “We denounce the continued inhuman outrages perpetrated upon American citizens for political reasons in certain Southern States of the Union.” But there was no follow-up pledge to act against these “outrages.”<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, the Minneapolis convention was a foreshadowing of even more difficult days ahead for African Americans, as their right to vote was systematically stripped away all over the South. They would need to wait for generations—well into the next century—before corrective action was taken to restore those rights. □



Keepsake ribbon from  
Pillsbury Company





Conventioners inside Exposition Hall, from *The Appeal*, June 11, 1892

## Notes

1. *Minneapolis Journal*, June 2, 1892, p. 4; *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 4, 1892, p. 1. On the convention, see Iric Nathanson, “The ballot has been fought and won’: The 1892 Republican Convention,” *Hennepin History* 65 (Fall 2006): 16–29.

2. For lynchings, see Library of Congress, Time Line of African American History, 1881–1900: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/aap/timelin2.html> (accessed Mar. 31, 2008). In 1885 the Minnesota census counted 673 blacks in Minneapolis and St. Anthony. Their numbers doubled by 1895; David V. Taylor, *African Americans in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 17.

3. No African Americans were included in Minnesota’s delegation, despite the best efforts of local blacks to secure a slot for Fredrick L. McGhee, a prominent St. Paul attorney and member of the state Republican Central Committee. State Republican leaders instead appointed him an at-large presidential elector, denying him a role in shaping policy but authorizing him to cast one of the state’s electoral votes in November. Even that honor was rescinded after a firestorm of protest from Scandinavian Republicans, who complained that their large ethnic community was denied representation. A Swedish American was appointed in his place. See Paul D. Nelson, *Fredrick L. McGhee, A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912*

(St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 35–36.

4. Here and below, *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 1, 1892, p. 5. *The Appeal*, the Twin Cities’ African American weekly newspaper, reported on the event in both cities; see June 4, 1892, p. 5, 8.

5. *Minneapolis Times*, June 2, 1892, p. 4.

6. *Minneapolis Times*, June 4, 1892, p. 2.

7. *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 4, 1892, p. 1, quoting James S. Clarkson, chairman of the Republican National Committee, as saying that Langston was “probably the best talker we will have.” A temporary chair acts until a committee, assembled at the convention, chooses a permanent chair. J. Sloat Fassett of New York was named temporary chair; Ohio governor William McKinley took the permanent post.

8. *Minneapolis Journal*, June 2, 1892, p. 7.

9. For more on Miller, see African American Voices in Congress, [www.avoiceline.org/cbc/bios19th.html](http://www.avoiceline.org/cbc/bios19th.html) (accessed Mar. 4, 2008).

10. *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 8, 1892, p. 7.

11. Here and below, *Minneapolis Journal*, June 8, 1892, p. 6.

12. *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 6, 1892, p. 5.

13. Here and two paragraphs below, *Minneapolis Times*, June 10, 1892, p. 3.

14. Here and two paragraphs below, *Minneapolis Journal*, June 9, 1892, p. 2.

Harrison retained significant support in Minnesota’s African American community. *The Appeal* editorialized that he had “ably and satisfactorily performed his duties”; June 4, 1892, p. 2.

14. The 1892 Democratic Party platform, adopted later that year in Chicago, made no reference to racial atrocities in the South. Rather, it maintained that racial antagonisms in the United States had “happily abated.” For both party platforms, see American Presidency Project, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/platforms.psp](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/platforms.psp) (accessed Mar. 6, 2008).

For a discussion of the Republican Party and its ambivalent attitudes toward African Americans during the later nineteenth century, see Stanley P. Hirshson, *Farewell to the Bloody Shirt: Northern Republicans and the Southern Negro, 1877–1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Vincent P. De Santis, *Republicans Face the Southern Question—The New Departure Years, 1877–1897* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959).

*All illustrations are from MHS collections. Object photography by Eric Mortenson/MHS.*



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).