

■ Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin: Address to the First National Conference of Colored Women

Date: July 1895

Author: Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin

Genre: Address; Speech

Summary Overview

Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin's "Address to the First National Conference of Colored Women" opened the proceedings for a group of one hundred African American women who met in Boston at the Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in July 1895. Ruffin was the president of the Women's Era Club in Boston, founded two years previously, and it was her work with this group that inspired her to found the National Federation of Afro-American Women. She organized and convened the Boston conference with a view to bringing together African American club women from across the nation to join with her in that effort. Attending the conference as representatives from clubs around the nation, the participants convened to assert their position as a critical component of the women's movement, to discuss the issues and challenges facing black women, and to debate how best to move forward in light of those challenges. The "Address to the First National Conference of Colored Women" was a call to action. Ruffin's remarks were brief, but they served to inspire a generation of African American women to active involvement in the women's movement and as a challenge to women everywhere to "bring in a new era to the colored women of America."

Defining Moment

The decades following the Civil War were a time of major social transformation. This was the period of the labor movement, rapid industrialization, large influxes of immigrants from Europe and Asia, and sweeping sentiments for social reforms. The U.S. government had devised a plan for "reconstructing" the South that set in motion a series of events that would propagate segregation for another hundred years. Women saw an opportunity to continue the work of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention for women's rights, and, in doing so, African American women saw their chance to improve their own condition. It was against this backdrop that Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin spoke to the National Conference of Colored Women.

The U.S. government's Reconstruction program created policies and procedures intended to rebuild a bitterly divided nation. These policies addressed reintegrating southern states into the political system,



Josephine S. Pierre Ruffin. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

dealing with former Confederate leaders, and, most important, defining the status of millions of newly freed slaves. Opinions varied on how best to resolve these matters. Abraham Lincoln had favored a policy of conciliation with the defeated South, but strong dissent arose during the troubled administration of Andrew Johnson (1865-1869), and the policies of the ensuing administration of Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1887) were dominated by the Radical Republican faction that stood for strong military enforcement of equal rights for the former slaves. These “radical” policies allowed for the passage of the Thirteenth (1865), Fourteenth (1868), and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and created military jurisdictions over former Confederate states. With full citizenship, African Americans during this period began participating in the political process, ushering in a few years of widespread black representation, including fifteen representatives and two senators in Congress. However, Reconstruction met with a backlash in the South, as political parties fractured, white supremacy grew, and federal military power was gradually withdrawn. Reconstruction was dealt a fatal blow with the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876, whose hands-off policy included the withdrawal of federal troops from the South. Reconstruction and the progress made for African Americans had ended.

As the postwar economy improved, a period of rapid industrialization, fueled by the growing numbers of immigrants, served as the catalyst for the growth of the labor movement. Advances in iron and steel production, the invention of the Morse telegraph (1837) and the telephone (1876), and the completion of the transcontinental railroad (1869) improved the nation’s infrastructure and connected distant parts of the country. The growing immigrant population found work in many of these industries. Between the 1840s and World War I, approximately thirty-seven million people migrated to the United States in search of land, fortune, and opportunity. As immigrant populations soared, cities and factories became overcrowded, and living and working conditions grew dire. The Progressive movement of the 1890s and early 1900s sought to improve these conditions as well as to break up corrupt political machines. The la-

bor movement also saw rapid expansion at this time, as unions fought for improved working conditions, regulation of work hours and pay, and prohibition of child labor.

This swell of sentiment for social reform was also taken up by the emerging women’s movement. After the 1848 Seneca Falls (New York) Convention, the movement grew in supporters, strength, and influence. Women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott were speaking, writing, and engaging people in conversation to further equality for women in education, employment, family life, religion, and public life. By 1869 the American Woman Suffrage Association had begun to include black women in the conversation, including Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, an early member in Boston. When the Civil Rights Act passed in 1875, preventing discrimination in “public accommodation” on the basis of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude”—with no mention of gender—women in the club movement began to fragment. A division formed in the suffrage community, with many women refusing to support black men’s voting rights at the expense of their own and preferring instead to focus solely on voting rights for women. Feeling isolated by this position from the white women’s club movement, African American women formed their own clubs, such as the National Federation of Afro-American Women (1895) and, later, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW, 1896). African American women’s clubs worked not only for women’s rights but also for the rights and welfare of black men and children. The desire for social reform that characterized the Progressive era helped further the influence of many of these clubs, as they sought political gain and a general improvement of black women’s social standing.

Author Biography

Josephine St. Pierre was born on August 31, 1842, in Boston, to well-to-do parents of (white) English and Martinican-African descent. Her parents were highly respected in the African American community. Because they opposed Boston’s segregated school system, they sent their daughter to several schools during her childhood, two just outside Boston and one in

The Woman's Era.

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WOMEN WORTH KNOWING.

No. 1.
Miss Blanche D. Washington.

EDWARD ELKINS ROCK.

Miss Blanche D. Washington is another example of what the race is doing in the world's advancement. She is one of the plucky, patient and persistent workers in the world of music, and notwithstanding the many drawbacks that beset her early pathway, chief of which was ill health, still, standing today as model teacher her fame is second to none.

Miss Washington resides at home with her mother, who is a successful business woman, being a celebrated machinist. They are charmingly domiciled at 120 West and 16th Streets, New York, in handsome luxuriously furnished apartments which bear every appearance of refined and cultivated taste.

While Miss Washington would not be considered a beautiful woman, still, she has an intense personal charm, which has been the means of drawing about her an immediate circle of friends. At the age of thirteen, she commenced the study of the piano under some of the most prominent professors of New York City. Her progress was

so rapid that all who knew her prophesied for her a great future. At fifteen she began teaching some little friends of hers and from that time on her life has been passed chiefly in teaching music and in order to give her pupils the best possible instructions, she is continually studying up methods of teaching from the best masters. Last year she attended Scharwenka Conservatory of Music, entering the class for teachers. This year she is studying harmony and composition in the National Conservatory of Music. She is also the composer of several pieces of music, her most recent and successful being a military schottische entitled "Friendship's Greeting."

Miss Washington claims that no true musician can expect to advance with the times without continual study. In addition to her regular teaching she has formed a class of all her pupils which meet for the incubation of a thorough knowledge of the theory of music. That she also cherishes an ideal, is found in the fact that she is endeavoring to establish a Conservatory of Music, where for a nominal sum the best of instruction in all the branches can be obtained, for, as she says, while the White Conservatory offers all advantages and is open to all, the charges are beyond the means of the majority of colored-Americans.

In this brief sketch it is impossible for the writer to say all that might be said in reference to the work of this charming woman, but still, I am glad of an opportunity to introduce, even through an inadequate description, one more of the cleverest women of the race to the busy readers of the Woman's Era.

The above is the first of a series of portraits of "Women Worth Knowing," which will appear in this journal.

Help in Choosing a School.

The publishers of the Woman's Era will, on application of any of its subscribers, send inquiries and all information easily obtainable, concerning any academy, college, normal, music, or art school in New England, on receipt of stamped and directed envelope. Address,

The Woman's Era, 120 West 16th St.

Front page of The Woman's Era, September 1894. By Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin.

New York City. She completed her education at the Bowdoin School, a coeducational institution then located on Derne Street in the Beacon Hill section of Boston.

In 1858, at the age of sixteen, Josephine St. Pierre married George Lewis Ruffin, a prominent attorney from Richmond, Virginia, and the first African American to graduate from Harvard Law School. George Ruffin, the first African American man elected to Boston's City Council, also served in the Massachusetts state legislature during the early 1870s. In 1883 he would become the first black judge in the United States. The Ruffins settled in the elite Beacon Hill neighborhood and eventually had five children. During the Civil War, they participated in the war effort, serving with the Sanitary Commission. It was during this period that Josephine became involved with suffrage and the women's movement.

After the war, St. Pierre Ruffin began working with several leaders of the suffrage movement, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Julia Ward Howe. In 1869, together with Howe and Lucy Stone, she helped form the American Women Suffrage Association. By this time, she had begun writing for the black weekly newspaper in Boston, the *Courant*, which involved her in another organization, the New England Women's Press Association. Later, Ruffin integrated the New England Women's Club, and in 1894 she organized the Women's Era Club, specifically for African American women. Her work in

these clubs focused specifically on how African American women could work to improve the conditions of all African Americans.

When George Ruffin died in 1886, Josephine's experience at the *Courant* prompted her to start her own newspaper with money from her husband's estate. The *Women's Era* newspaper became the first paper published for and by African American women. Financial stability allowed her to increase her involvement with the women's club movement, and in 1895 Ruffin organized the First National Conference of Colored Women, with a view to forming a national organization to unite the African American women's clubs of America. Delegates from clubs all across the United States attended. It was to these women that Ruffin spoke. Within the year, the National Federation of Afro-American Women was a reality and, in 1896, merged with the Colored Women's League of Washington to form the NACW, an organization that is still active today as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Ruffin continued in community service and was especially involved in advancing African American women's rights. By 1910 she had helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Upon her death on March 13, 1924, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin was widely honored for her skills as a journalist, activist, and pioneer in the African American women's rights movement.



Historical Document

Address to the First National Conference of Colored Women

It is with especial joy and pride that I welcome you all to this, our first conference. It is only recently that women have waked up to the importance of meeting in council, and great as has been the advantage to women *generally*, and important as it is and has been that they should confer, the necessity has not been nearly so great, matters at stake not nearly so vital, as that *we*, bearing peculiar blunders, suffering under especial hardships, enduring peculiar privations, should meet for a “good talk” among ourselves. Although rather hastily called, you as well as I can testify how long and how earnestly a conference has been thought of and hoped for and even prepared for. These women’s clubs, which have sprung up all over the country, built and run upon broad and strong lines, have all been a preparation, small conferences in themselves, and their spontaneous birth and enthusiastic support have been little less than inspirational on the part of our women and a general preparation for a large union such as it is hoped this conference will lead to. Five years ago we had no colored women’s clubs outside of those formed for special work; today, with little over a month’s notice, we are able to call representatives from more than twenty clubs. It is a good showing. It stands for much. It shows that we are truly American women, with all the adaptability, readiness to seize and possess our opportunities, willingness to do our part for good as other American women.

The reasons why we should confer are so apparent that it would seem hardly necessary to enumerate them, and yet there are none of them but demand our serious consideration. In the first place we need to feel the cheer and inspiration of meeting each other; we need to gain the courage and fresh life that comes from the mingling of congenial souls, of those working for the same ends. Next, we need to talk over those things that are of especial interest to us as *colored women*, the training of our children, openings for our boys and girls, how they can be prepared for occupations and occupations may be found or opened for them, what *we* especially can do in the moral education and physical development, the home training it is necessary to give our children in order to prepare them to meet the peculiar conditions in which they shall find themselves, how to make the most of our own, to some extent, limited opportunities. Besides these are the general questions of the day, which we cannot afford to be indifferent to: temperance, morality, the higher education, hygienic and domestic questions. If these things need the serious consideration of women more advantageously placed by reason of all the aid to right thinking and living with which they are surrounded, surely we, with everything to pull us back, to hinder us in developing, need to take every opportunity and means for the thoughtful consideration which shall lead to wise action.

I have left the strongest reason for our conferring together until the last. All over America there is to be found a large and growing class of earnest, intelligent, progressive colored women, women who, if not leading full, useful lives, are only waiting for the opportunity to do so, many of them warped and cramped for lack of opportunity, not only to do more but to *be* more; and yet, if an estimate of the colored women of America is called for, the inevitable reply, glibly given is, "For the most part ignorant and immoral, some exceptions of course, but these don't count."

Now for the sake of the thousands of self-sacrificing young women teaching and preaching in lonely southern backwoods for the noble army of mothers who have given birth to these girls, mothers whose intelligence is only limited by their opportunity to get at books, for the sake of the fine cultured women who have carried off the honors in school here and often abroad, for the sake of our own dignity, the dignity of our race, and the future good name of our children, it is "meet, right and our bounden duty" to stand forth and declare ourselves and principles, to teach an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women. Too long have we been silent under unjust and unholy charges; we cannot expect to have them removed until we disprove them through *ourselves*. It is not enough to try to disprove unjust charges through individual effort, that never goes any further. Year after year southern women have protested against the admission of colored women into any national organization on the ground of the immorality of these women, and because all refutation has only been tried by individual work the charge has never been crushed, as it could and should have been at the first. Now with an army of organized women standing for purity and mental worth, we in ourselves deny the charge and open the eyes of the world to a state of affairs to which they have been blind, often willfully so, and the very fact that the charges, audaciously and flippantly made, as they often are, are of so humiliating and delicate a nature, serves to protect the accuser by driving the helpless accused into mortified silence. It is to break this silence, not by noisy protestations of what we are not, but by a dignified showing of what we are and hope to become that we are impelled to take this step, to make of this gathering an object lesson to the world. For many and apparent reasons it is especially fitting that the *women* of the race take the lead in this movement, but for all this we recognize the necessity of the sympathy of our husbands, brothers and fathers.

Our woman's movement is woman's movement in that it is led and directed by women for the good of women and men, for the benefit of *all* humanity, which is more than any one branch or section of it. We want, we ask the active interest of our men, and, too, we are not drawing the color line; we are women, American women, as intensely interested in all that pertains to us as such as all other American women; we are not alienating or withdrawing, we are only coming to the front, willing to join any others in the same work and cordially inviting and welcoming any others to join us.

If there is any one thing I would especially enjoin upon this conference it is union and earnestness. The questions that are to come before us are of too much import to be weakened by any trivialities or personalities. If any differences arise let them be quickly settled, with the feeling that we are all workers to the same end, to elevate and dignify colored American womanhood. This conference will not be what I expect if it does not show the wisdom, indeed the absolute necessity of a national organization of our women. Every year new questions coming up will prove it to us. This hurried, almost informal convention does not begin to meet our needs, it is only a beginning, made here in dear old Boston, where the scales of justice and generosity hang evenly balanced, and where the people “dare be true” to their best instincts and stand ready to lend aid and sympathy to worthy struggles. It is hoped and believed that from this will spring an organization that will in truth bring in a new era to the colored women of America.



Glossary

“meet, right and our bounden duty”: a quote from a Christian prayer, “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, Holy Father, Almighty, Everlasting God.”

Document Analysis

Although the “Address to the First National Conference of Colored Women” is quite short, it had a resounding impact on the future of the African American women’s movement. The address had one primary purpose: to convince black women of the necessity of creating their own national organization. Ruffin saw an opportunity for black women’s groups to coalesce in the hope of creating a strong national voice for women everywhere. It is this point that makes Ruffin’s address singular: She spoke not only to African American women but also to black men and white women. It was her hope to improve the lives of African Americans through their own efforts and through the efforts of white people as well. Ruffin’s speech was widely celebrated, and only a year later Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell, founder of the Colored Women’s League of Washington and a well-known suffragist and journalist, combined their organizations to form the NACW.

Ruffin’s address falls into three distinct sections. The first paragraph concerns the meeting itself—how the various groups came together, the rise of women’s clubs, and the message that such a meeting would send to society. The main section (paragraphs 2-5) deals with the reasons for holding the conference. This is the lengthiest section, and it is where the heart of her argument lies. The last section is a very brief call to action, wherein Ruffin firmly states “the absolute necessity of a national organization of our women.”

Ruffin opens by citing the need for black women to meet for a “good talk.” With no national organization representing black women, this would be the opportunity to come together, regardless of geography, and discuss important issues. To Ruffin, the particular situation of black women, the hardships they faced, and the deprivations they endured because of their race and gender spoke to this need. Although the conference was put together rather rapidly, the leaders had been thinking for some time about convening all the regional women’s clubs. Such clubs had been appearing all across the country, for both white and black women. Ruffin credits their work as the inspiration for the conference and for the desired creation of a

national organization. Five years prior to the conference, there had been no clubs for African American women. By 1895 representatives from twenty such clubs were in attendance. Ruffin cites their history and their willingness to do their part as evidence that they, too, are “truly American women.”

Ruffin turns next to the reasons for convening. First, she mentions how much courage and inspiration would be drawn from women meeting other women who shared the same goals. Next, she lays out the practical matters they should discuss, including the education of their children, the mental and intellectual elevation of all black people, and the ways in which to make the best of their situations, given their limited resources and social standing. Ruffin also speaks of the need to discuss the issues of the day, such as temperance, higher education, and domesticity. The end of the second paragraph sums up these initial reasons for meeting: “Surely we, with everything to pull us back, to hinder us in developing, need to take every opportunity and means for the thoughtful consideration which shall lead to wise action.”

Ruffin then notes the unfortunate prevailing belief regarding the general nature of black women, which, she says, is that they are “for the most part, ignorant and immoral, some exceptions, of course, but these don’t count.” She considers this attitude—that progressive black women of considerable talent, morals, education, and skill were being regarded nationwide as second-rate—to be the strongest reason for coming together. Women’s opportunities were limited, even foreclosed, by this blatant racism. If such women were given even a small chance to improve the conditions of their lives, Ruffin believed they could create improvements in the lives of all other African Americans.

How, then, could this small chance be created? Ruffin’s answer in paragraph 4 is one of the most passionate sections of her address. She understood that the women to whom she was speaking were some of the most affluent, educated, and privileged African Americans in the country. The changes Ruffin here envisions for African Americans were already in progress among her peers. It was for those less fortunate—the large body of African Americans—that opportunities needed to be created. To Ruffin, the is-

sues were not merely improved education, rewarding employment, and the chance to travel. She viewed the matter in broader terms: The dignity of the race demanded that she and women like her “stand forth and declare ourselves and our principles.” To be seen as good, intelligent, hardworking people, these women had to show the world collective, and not merely individual, action. This was a platform from which black women could act as paragons, opening the eyes of the world to their shining example.

Central to this argument is a point that provides a good deal of insight into the mind-set from which these women were operating. Ruffin implies that up to this point black women had fallen silent when bearing witness to the hardships they all faced. They were also silent in the face of the “unholy charges” made against them. Her call to speak out represented a tangible shift in policy for African American social action. Ruffin admits that she herself had yielded to prevailing attitudes, first by publicly accepting her circumstances and then by simply joining individual women’s clubs and attempting to leverage their resources to make headway. However, as the larger women’s movement increasingly came to focus on the issue of suffrage, the unfortunate side effect was neglect for the broader rights of African American women. Black women like Ruffin therefore began to push for their own representation, their own groups. The 1895 Boston conference declared that black women, at the expense of their dignity, could no longer accept this disparity of treatment. However, in stepping into the public forum, these women recognized that their actions, words, and deeds would be scrutinized. As Ruffin put it, “Now with an army of organized women standing for purity and mental worth, we...open the eyes of the world.” Serving as the standard for all African Americans weighed heavily on their minds, and this understanding informed the decisions and actions of the expanding African American women’s club movement. Certainly the importance of their decisions was apparent throughout Ruffin’s address.

At this point in her speech, Ruffin makes some interesting rhetorical choices, which for modern readers should serve as clues to the particular circumstances of black women at the time. The first is

her refusal to discuss certain claims made against African American women by the white women’s organizations. She alludes to situations where southern women had protested the admission of black women into historically white women’s clubs, thus propagating racist stereotypes of the “immoral” black woman. Yet Ruffin declines to mention any of these protestations specifically. She says, in paragraph 4, that many of the claims of white women were so humiliating that they moved black women to “mortified silence.” Her refusal to discuss this slander in her address points to the degrading nature of the allegations as well as to a desire to elevate the discourse above nasty rhetoric. By meeting the protestations with dignity and respect, Ruffin hoped that the character of these African American club women would attest to their virtue. In what would henceforth become the tone of the language of African American women’s clubs, the struggle to overcome humiliation and exclusion would always depend on virtue and strength of character.

The second rhetorical choice that Ruffin makes in this latter part of her address is to assign the challenge specifically to black women: “For many and apparent reasons it is especially fitting that the *women* of the race take the lead in this movement.” Nothing further needed to be said for those present that afternoon, but modern readers may benefit from a brief discussion of her remarks. Ruffin’s choice relates to the complete subjugation of African American males during this period. Black males were seen by much of the white population in terms of stereotypes—“lazy,” “violent,” “insolent,” and “stupid.” This was the period when lynchings were becoming a common response to any black assertiveness. While black women were not much better off than their men folk, they were more able to step onto a public platform without being perceived as a threat to the structure of white society.

Ruffin makes it clear that it would be African American women’s strength of character that would help all African Americans persevere and flourish, and this sentiment pervades the end of the address. Her closing words are poignant. Here she moves beyond the bounds of the room and addresses the wider women’s movement. She acknowledges the desire to include women and men, regardless of color. The idea

of creating a universal movement had divided white women working toward suffrage in the 1870s. But for Ruffin, a movement for one was already a movement for all. She demonstrated her commitment to this universal principle at the conference most clearly at the start of her final paragraph, which she begins by calling for “union and earnestness.”

In her final paragraph, Ruffin lays out her paramount hope for the outcome of the conference: to see the creation of a national all-black women’s organization. She believed that in order for African American women to achieve the hoped-for change, women from all areas of the country, in all walks of life, would have to band together: “From this will spring an organization that will in truth bring in a new era to the colored woman of America.”

Essential Themes

The impact of Ruffin’s address was felt immediately by the African American community. Her newly established National Federation of Afro-American Women was paralleled by organizations such as the Colored Women’s League of Washington, which had been founded two years earlier by Helen Cook. The year following the conference saw the organization of the NACW, which merged Ruffin’s federation and the Colored Women’s League of Washington. It became clear after this address that the only way African American women were going to be able to achieve any measure of standing was by banding together as one cohesive group. Indeed, the 1933 publication of *Lifting as They Climb* by the NACW member Elizabeth Lindsay Davis included a direct reprinting of the “Call to Conference,” the list of attendees, the conference program schedule, and Ruffin’s address in their entirety, owing to their significance in the formation of the first national club for African American women.

In the years and months after her remarks, Ruffin held the position of vice president of the NACW while maintaining her membership in the New England Women’s Club and the New Era Club, desegregating both clubs. In 1900 Ruffin attended a meeting of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, where she was denied a seat on the floor after refusing to renounce her membership in the NACW. Ruffin was

promptly excused from the meeting proceedings. This event became known as the “Ruffin incident,” gaining national notoriety for both Ruffin and the NACW.

Not all African Americans were pleased with this attention. Several well-respected people offered Ruffin their support following the incident, but the black orator Booker T. Washington was not one of them. In September of 1895, speaking just a few months after Ruffin gave her address, the Tuskegee Institute educator addressed an audience at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. Recognizing the social realities of his day, Washington felt that the only way for African Americans to succeed was through accommodation and industrial education, instead of focusing on immediately achieving civil rights. In his Atlanta Exposition Address, he proposed a compromise between asking for civil rights and receiving education and skills.

The differing viewpoints within the African American community began to come to a head, with those advocating for equality and civil rights and those advocating accommodation standing in stark contrast to each other. A few years later, an organization arose to work for civil rights and justice for all people of color. Founded in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, headed by the Harvard-trained historian and sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, was formed in opposition to the accommodationist viewpoints of Washington. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin was an early member and leader within this organization.

—Katherine M. Johnson, MA

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