

Fredrick Lamar McGhee Has Languished for Too Long in Undeserved Obscurity

*Originally Printed in Parish Connection Volume IV, Issue 1,
November 2004*

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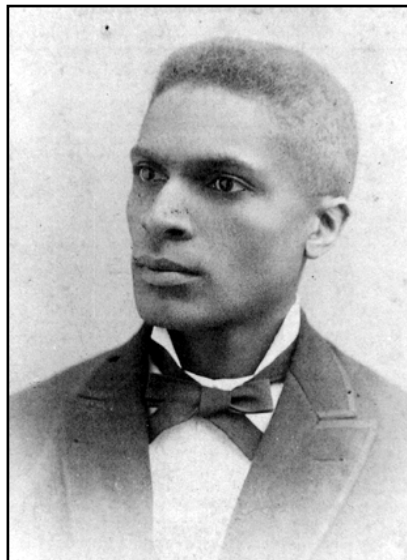
In light of this issue's theme, the Editors of Parish Connection have chosen to reprint this piece for its value and significance to the discussion on an individual's faith during times of struggle and turmoil.

Thirty-four years before the founding of St. Augustine Seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi (1923) and twenty-four years after the end of the U.S. Civil War (1865), Daniel Rudd and one hundred plus African American Catholic men convened the first National Black Catholic Congress (1889) in Washington, D.C. Four additional Black Catholic Congresses were held in each of the succeeding years. Were it not for their leadership efforts to improve the lives of Black Catholics in Church and society, the creation of a Black Priesthood in the U.S. might have been forstalled, perhaps until the more egalitarian reinvention of the U.S. society in the 1950s and 1960s. Who were these men and to what extent can we glean from their efforts the workings of God's Blessings in them to bring about His Kingdom?

THE TALENTED TENTH OF THE BLACK CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

Borrowing the concept of W.E.B. Du Bois, we might say that they were among the **Talented Tenth** of the Black Catholic and larger community of the period. They were learned men, doctors, lawyers, newspaper editors and publishers, government workers, leaders in their local churches and communities, educators and more. Most importantly, they were spiritually devout and informed Catholics. Borrowing another characterization of Black leaders who devoted their time, talents and finances in efforts to uplift the Black community, each was a **Race Man**, in his own right and in the truest sense of the meaning. Unquestionably, Daniel Rudd was the leader of the National Black Catholic Congress movement.

He was an untiring advocate for the spiritual, educational, and economic well-being of Black Catholics and was just as strong an advocate for the betterment of all African



FREDRICK MCGHEE, circa 1890. Portrait by St. Paul's prominent African American photographer, Harry Shepherd. photo: *Minnesota Historical Society* - www.mnhs.org

Americans (See Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, pp.164-172). Taking nothing away from Daniel Rudd's leadership, we would like to highlight the contributions, in Church and society, of another distinguished member of the Black Catholic leadership of the period, Fredrick L. McGhee (1861-1912).

FROM SLAVERY TO PROMINENCE AS A DISTINGUISHED CRIMINAL AND CIVIL RIGHT'S ATTORNEY

Fredrick and his two brothers, Matthew and Barclay, were born into slavery on a Mississippi farm. After the Civil War, they moved with their parents, Abraham and Sar-

ah, to Knoxville, Tennessee. Both parents died shortly afterward, leaving the three to fend for themselves. Fredrick somehow completed his undergraduate studies at Knoxville College, with the assistance of the Freedmen's Bureau and the Presbyterian Church. He then studied law in Chicago, and obtained his law degree in 1885, from what was to become Northwestern University School of Law. He practiced law in Chicago, where he earned a considerable reputation as a criminal lawyer, representing Blacks and wealthy Whites. McGhee was a protégé of Chicago's greatest Black lawyer, Edward H. Morris.

In 1889, McGhee moved his family to Minnesota, where he became the first African American attorney to practice law. Distinguished by his hawk-like gaze and shock of silver hair, his forceful oratory and fierce advocacy, McGhee rose to fame as an intelligent and tireless criminal and civil rights attorney. Recognizing the power of the courts, he used his considerable legal skills and his passion for justice to challenge the growing segregation and other discrimination laws against Blacks (See Paul D. Nelson's biography, *Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861-1912*, for an excellent discussion of his abilities as a courtroom lawyer, and an appreciation of the intensity, fervor and oratorical eloquence that he incorporated in the defense of a client). Always mindful of the plight of Blacks, he found justice for many in the courts. He even won a clemency from President Benjamin Harrison for a client, Lewis Carter, a Black soldier convicted of raping a White woman.

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

McGhee also gained considerable notoriety in the politics of St. Paul, the State of Minnesota and at the national level, first in the Republican Party, then in the Democratic Party. The Black community of St.



TWELVE OF THE TWENTY-NINE FOUNDING MEMBERS OF THE NIAGARA MOVEMENT, 1905. Top Row: H. A. Thompson, New York; Alonzo Herndon, Georgia; John Hope, Georgia; unidentified; Middle Row: Fredrick McGhee, Minnesota; Norris F. Herndon, son of Alonzo; J. Max Barber, Illinois; W.E.B. Du Bois, Georgia; Robber Bonner, Massachusetts; Bottom Row: Henry L. Bialy, Washington, D.C.; Clement G. Morgan, Massachusetts; W.H.H. Hart, Washington, D.C.; and B.S. Smith, Kansas. photo: Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst - www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/spec.html

Paul held him, his civil rights and political leadership in high esteem, under both partisan levels. He guided their political clout to help win the St. Paul mayoral seat for the Republican Party. Though rescinded, the Republican Party chose him as a presidential elector in 1882. His disappointment over this and other unfulfilled promises by the Republican Party in behalf of the Black community led him to switch his allegiance to the Democrats (Paul D. Nelson).

AN ALLY OF DUBOIS IN THE NIAGARA MOVEMENT

McGhee, along with other giants of the struggle for justice and equality, i.e., W. E. B. Du Bois, Monroe Trotter, T. Thomas Fortune, Charles E. Bentley, and others, was a founding member of the Niagara Movement, the precursor organization to

the National Association for the advancement of Colored People (NAACP). When the former failed, according to Cyprian Davis, McGhee played a seminal role in the development of the legal arm of the NAACP. Though he was an early supporter of Booker T. Washington's Afro-American Council, another social betterment effort of the period working in behalf of Blacks, he soon disabused himself of what he perceived to be Washington's logrolling politics. He disagreed with Washington's doctrine of social and political accommodationism. A doctrine that preached hard work and limited economic competitive and employment opportunities, at the expense of full social, political, educational and economic rights was not in the best interest of Blacks, McGhee concluded. His involvement in the Niagara Movement singled his switch from the Washington to the Du Bois camp.

McGHEE'S LEADERSHIP IS AUTHENTIC

In his preface to Paul D. Nelson's biography, David Levering Lewis, the twice distinguished Pulitzer Prize author of the Du Bois biography, had this to say of McGhee:

"...Throughout his singular life, Fredrick L. McGhee displayed a principled militancy and fierce intelligence. He was celebrated as one of Black America's most representative men of distinction. No less an authority than W.E.B. Du Bois, the embodiment of black civil rights and professional probity, lamented McGhee's passing as a terrible loss."

Du Bois called him, "brilliant...intense and eloquent of speech." Roy Wilkins, former Chairman of the NAACP, now deceased said that "...it was through him that the National Association for the Advance-

ment of Colored People reached St. Paul and (our house at) 906 Galtier Street." Commenting on Paul Nelson's biography of McGhee, Julian Bond reminds us of the remarkable achievements of McGhee and his contemporaries and the perilous times in which they lived and struggled,

"...Paul Nelson has rescued an important figure in American history from undeserved obscurity. His biography of the civil rights pioneer Fredrick L. McGhee tells a remarkable story of achievement, accomplishment and triumph and deepens our understanding of the struggle of African Americans in the dark decades before the dawn of the modern civil rights movement."

PRACTICING THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL

Fredrick McGhee converted to the Catholic faith in 1891. He was an active member of St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. Profoundly influenced by the charismatic Archbishop John Ireland, whose racial ideals were as enlightened as his theology was progressive, McGhee foresaw African American converts playing a vital role in the great Catholic-inspired transformation of the American society. Though McGhee was not yet a Catholic at the time of the first two National Black Catholic congresses, it did not take him long to gain distinction therein, once he became involved. At the third congress, he spoke eloquently against the evils of segregation in public and church education, unfair labor practices, the evils of lynching, as well as other social evils perpetrated against Blacks.

One of McGhee's greatest contributions to the National Black Catholic Movement might have been his proposal for the creation of a permanent self-sustaining organization for the congress movement. This organization would provide the framework for implementing the designs set forth in the congresses. It would serve as the interactive link between the local parish societies and the national organization. Structure has an important correlation to organizational permanence, and organizational perma-

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nence to guiding and sustaining the work of human betterment, as McGhee understood (See Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*, p.181).

AN INCIPIENT BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

His other contributions to the Black Catholic Movement have yet to be fully revealed. This notwithstanding, we do know enough to salute his achievements and to thank him. We can take immense pride and encouragement in knowing that he is among our foreparents of this period, who, though some of whom were former slaves, developed their God-given gifts and submitted them to the guidance of the Spirit to struggle for our spiritual and social betterment. Most importantly, we are indebted to them for what Cyprian Davis refers to as "*an insipient Black Catholic theology of church.*" It is the understanding that the Church preserves the deposit of faith because it teaches the doctrine of the equality of all peoples before God. The mission of the Church, this theology goes on, is to announce love in the place of hate, to raise the downtrodden and to proclaim the essential value of all men and women.

It further contends that the Church has the moral imperative to denounce racism, because it goes contrary to authentic Catholic belief and morality. Quoting from an obscure document of the third National Black Catholic Congress, Cyprian Davis shares, what we believe is a very profound and elegant statement of the delegates' faith in and love for the Catholic Church,

"...With thorough confidence in the rectitude of our course in the enduring love of Mother Church, and the consciousness of our priesthood of the faithful, we show our devotion to the Church, our jealousy of her glory and our love for her history," (Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*, ibid.).

AN EMERGING PAPAL AND U.S. EPISCOPAL RESPONSE

The historical record has not yet established a causal relationship between the efforts of the Black Catholic leadership and what seemed to be a heightened sense of Papal and, consequently, United States Episcopal attention to the needs of Black Catholics during this period. Perhaps in

time more research will support such a correlational proposition. Whatever and whoever precipitated the new attention, the facts reveal that it manifested itself in a number of ways. Examples of these are the increased pastoral, spiritual and educational activities by religious communities among Black Catholics and evangelization in the unchurched Black community, new construction of Black Catholic Churches and schools, the founding of the Catholic Board of Negro Missions, the establishment of the SVD Mission House for the formation of a Black clergy and the founding of the Knights of Peter Claver.

A RACE MAN IS ONE WHO SERVES THE BETTERMENT OF THE RACE

Who was Fredrick L. McGhee...? One can rightly say that he was a **Race Man**. He was a member of the **Black Catholic Talented Tenth** of the period. He was a member of the **Priesthood of the Faithful**. We are proud of him and his accomplishments. *PC*

"ALL ARE WELCOME?" RACE IN THE CHURCH TODAY

ARCHDIOCESE OF CINCINNATI'S FORUM ON RACE

FRIDAY, JAN. 28, 2001 - KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT 6:00 PM,
RECEPTION AT 9:00 PM

SATURDAY, JAN. 29, 2011 - KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT 9:00 AM



University of Dayton - Kennedy Center

300 College Park • Dayton, OH 45469

Registration - \$35.00

Registration Deadline - January 10, 2011

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