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THE 1867 CHARLESTON STREETCAR SIT-INS A Case of Successful Black Protest

WILLIAM C. HINE *

Considered merely as a pair of isolated incidents, the 1867 Charleston streetcar protests do not figure among the more momentous events of Reconstruction. Yet a closer examination of these black "sit-ins" provides some revealing insights into the factors that impelled social change during that era.¹

Despite the ravages wrought by the War in Charleston, a group of local businessmen, imbued with bold optimism and ready capital, formed the Charleston City Railway Company in the Summer of 1866.² Construction began in mid-October and two months later its first horse drawn vehicles were traversing the streets of the city.³ It was understood from the outset that Charleston's blacks would not ride in the cars, nor was an effort made to establish separate "jim crow" cars.⁴ Blacks were permitted to ride on the front and rear platforms, but the unwritten com-

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¹ There were several other streetcar protests in the post Civil War period in New Orleans, Richmond, Louisville and Savannah. New Orleans witnessed a successful "sit-in" movement against separate "star cars" for blacks. Roger A. Fischer, "A Pioneer Protest: The New Orleans Streetcar Controversy of 1867," *Journal of Negro History*, LIII (July, 1968), 219-33. There was a similar protest in Richmond against segregated cars in the same year. Alrutheus A. Taylor, *The Negro in the Reconstruction of Virginia* (Washington, 1926), 52, 214. The Louisville affair was a planned non-violent campaign in a state that was not enduring military reconstruction. Marjorie M. Norris, "An Early Instance of Non-violence: The Louisville Demonstrations, 1870-71," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXII (November, 1966), 487-504.

² Prior to the War a streetcar company had been founded in Charleston and had received a charter in January, 1861. But the War abruptly ended that venture. Hence the effort in 1866 was actually a second attempt to bring streetcars to Charleston.

³ The downtown terminal of the streetcar line was at the Exchange or old post office. A double set of tracks ran over Broad street to Meeting and up Meeting to Calhoun street and then across Calhoun one block to King street. The tracks then ran up King to Shepard street which was the location of the uptown terminal. There was also a single branch route that ran off of the main line at the corner of Meeting and Wentworth streets. It ran across Wentworth to Rutledge and up Rutledge to Spring street. *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 15, 1866.

⁴ There had been some discussion by the company's directors concerning the establishment of separate cars or separate sections within cars for blacks. Nothing came of it, however. *Ibid.*

pany rule forbidding blacks inside the cars was well understood and evidently accepted—for a time.⁵

Less than three months after the inauguration of streetcar travel in Charleston, Congress passed on March 2, 1867—over President Johnson's veto—the first Military Reconstruction Act. The Act guaranteed, among other things, the right of Southern black men to participate in the reorganization of the former Confederate states. Charleston's black population understandably responded with excitement and enthusiasm at the prospect of political involvement.⁶

But by no means was the black populace then simply content to accept patiently this first clear indication of political progress. What followed was a swift, though miniature, demonstration of the revolution of rising expectations. Optimism rose significantly indeed with the passage of that first Reconstruction Act, and imaginations were fired to seek an even greater measure of progress.

On Tuesday afternoon March 26 between 1,500 and 2,000 people met outdoors on the Citadel Square. The purpose of this mostly black gathering was to ratify the Republican party platform drawn up a few evenings earlier and to proceed with the party's formation.⁷ Several black and white speakers urged blacks to vote and demanded equal rights. And they stressed above all "the necessity of united action by the colored people." But U. S. Marshal J. P. M. Epping cautioned the audience to be wary of clever politicians who would deprive them of their recently won gains. Rev. E. J. Adams, a local black minister, then read the party platform. More speeches followed including remarks by novice black politicians Robert Brown Elliott, A. J. Ransier, Francis L. Cardozo, Rev. B. F. Randolph and Rev. Richard H. Cain.⁸

Buoyed with hope and confidence as the meeting concluded, a number of unnamed black men spontaneously boarded a nearby streetcar at Calhoun and Meeting streets. They claimed the right to ride and sit in the cars, and very rapidly the movement spread to other streetcars

⁵ The rules and regulations for conductors and drivers were published when the cars began operating. No mention was made of black riders. *Ibid.*, December 17, 1866.

⁶ As early as November of 1865 a convention of South Carolina blacks appealed to the state legislature to grant suffrage and equal rights to men of color. *Proceedings of the Colored People's Convention of the State of South Carolina* (Charleston, 1865), 21.

⁷ *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 27, 1867.

⁸ *Ibid.* The speeches by the black politicians were not recorded by any of Charleston's three daily newspapers.

in the vicinity. The cars were immediately halted and the black riders subsequently arrested and removed by local police and Union troops.⁹

Six days later the scenario was repeated at the same location. Two black men, Daniel McInnis and Sidney Eckhard, were arrested on the afternoon of April 1 for attempting to ride in one of the cars after they had been warned that they were in violation of the rules.¹⁰ As word of their arrests spread, "an excited crowd of darkeys" assembled according to the *Daily News*, and more trouble ensued as brickbats were thrown and additional arrests were made.¹¹ The *Daily Courier* also reported that two policemen were badly beaten.¹²

It is quite unlikely that the attempt to gain access to the streetcars was a planned effort by either black or white Radical leadership in Charleston. Though Charleston's black leaders had been active since the end of the War in trying to secure civil and political rights, and though they were apparently sorely disappointed in the streetcar company's policy, there was not the slightest hint of planned direct action.¹³ To the contrary, the bi-racial and Republican Charleston *Advocate* gravely advised against demanding too much too fast: "Let no violence be used to secure in this respect, equal rights in our city. The people of Charleston have not, as yet, become accustomed to the presence of colored persons as citizens."¹⁴

Moreover, Second Military District Commander Daniel Sickles, on the same evening as the first streetcar incident, insisted to a group of serenading blacks that "they avoid every thing like violence, impatience and indecorum."¹⁵ The head of the Freedmen's Bureau in South Carolina, General Robert K. Scott, soon thereafter issued a circular letter admonishing blacks to resist the temptation to achieve rights by force.

⁹ *Ibid.*, The *New York Times*, April 2, 1867. See also Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill, 1965), pp. 282-283.

¹⁰ *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 2, 1867, and *Charleston Daily News*, April 2, 1867.

¹¹ *Charleston Daily News*, April 2, 1867.

¹² *Charleston Daily Courier*, April 3, 1867.

¹³ See the *Proceedings of the Colored People's Convention and the New York Times*, January 7, 1867.

¹⁴ *Charleston Advocate*, April 6, 1867. The *Advocate* was a weekly newspaper founded by white Methodists from Boston and it was edited by Rev. A. Webster with the assistance of a black associate editor, Rev. B. F. Randolph. Webster became the first President of Claffin College in Orangeburg in 1869 while Randolph entered politics and was elected state senator from Orangeburg in 1868 and was subsequently assassinated the same year.

¹⁵ *Charleston Daily Courier*, March 29, 1867.

Rather, Scott suggested, they should appeal to proper authorities through proper channels. Mob rule would not be tolerated.¹⁶

The "sit-ins" seem to have been more a product of rising aspirations and expectations among some elements of Charleston's black population, stimulated by the passage of the first Reconstruction Act, than a result of prodding by eager Radical leadership. It was the National Commission on Civil Disorders a century later that observed in another racial context that: "Negroes no longer felt that they had to accept the humiliations of second-class citizenship. Ironically, it was the very successes in the legislatures and the courts that, more perhaps than any other single factor, led to intensified Negro expectations and resulting dissatisfaction with the limitations of legal and legislative programs."¹⁷ The same phenomenon certainly appears to have affected the black community with the commencement of Radical Reconstruction in Charleston in the Spring of 1867.

The initial response of the local white populace to the protests was a somewhat bemused indifference. Coming hard on the heels of the enactment of military reconstruction, the reaction was not, as might have been expected, outraged indignation. The usually flaming *Mercury* banked its fires and dismissed the first incident as of "little consequence."¹⁸ The *Daily News* downplayed the affair "as one of those incidents which might have happened in the skirts of any large crowd. It was not known a hundred yards from the spot where it occurred and was greeted without violence or resistance."¹⁹ After the second "sit-in," however, white patience quickly vanished as the *News* claimed that the incident was "a preconcerted scheme" and a disgrace.²⁰ It was the correspondent of the moderate and Republican *New York Times* who reacted most vitriolically, bitterly lamenting the danger that black streetcar riders presented to white womanhood: "If the negroes here [Charleston], the large majority of whom are squalid and filthy, obtain the right to ride inside the cars, it is feared that the whites, especially the ladies, will shun the line, and the enterprise, which has been found

¹⁶ Charleston *Daily News*, April 6, 1867. Scott was elected the first Republican governor of South Carolina a year later.

¹⁷ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Otto Kerner, chairman (Washington, 1968), p. 106.

¹⁸ Charleston *Mercury*, March 27, 1867.

¹⁹ Charleston *Daily News*, April 1, 1867.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, April 2, 1867. After passage of the first Reconstruction Act, all three of Charleston's daily newspapers embarked on a campaign to reassure Charlestonians by demonstrating that blacks and whites had essentially the same interests and would, therefore, vote together. Possibly this explains why the first response was so tempered.

a great public convenience, will practically be broken up.”²¹ The *Times*’ gloomy prediction went unfulfilled.

The “sit-ins” notwithstanding, the company did not give in to black demands. After all, this was not a boycott and the company could conceivably have lost white riders even if it gained darker ones. How long or how stubbornly the company would have continued to resist black pressure is impossible to estimate. But on April 17 a black woman, Mary P. Bowers, was unceremoniously ejected from a streetcar after she had resolutely insisted upon the right to ride. She immediately filed a complaint with Assistant Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner Scott who, on April 22, appealed to President Jonathan S. Riggs of the streetcar company to allow the “large numbers of colored citizens” to enter the cars. Scott argued that “By doing so you will quietly settle the vexed question which at present disturbs and agitates the public mind.”²² The Commissioner pled for voluntary action; he was not issuing an order. The company quickly acquiesced. At a meeting of the board of directors on May 3, it was decided to open the cars to all persons regardless of color.²³ Shortly thereafter, Charleston’s blacks began riding in the cars and continued to do so until segregation was reimposed just after the turn of the century.²⁴

Thus the incidents surrounding the Charleston streetcar protests in 1867 illuminate some of the little known recesses of Reconstruction. The inception of Radical Reconstruction in Charleston, rather than mollifying black aspirations, raised black expectations and incited further action. Whites, in the meantime, initially paid only casual attention to the whole affair and did not react with the venom that might well have been anticipated. And finally, substantive change only occurred when the Federal government took the initiative and intervened with the streetcar company to forsake its “white only” policy.²⁵

²¹ *New York Times*, April 5, 1867.

²² This correspondence was published in the *Daily News* on May 6, 1867. Pointedly, Scott based the appeal, not on the “lawless” sit-ins, but on a legitimate complaint filed in a proper manner.

²³ *Charleston Daily News*, May 4, 1867. General Sickles followed up in June by issuing an order prohibiting racial discrimination on railroads, horsecars, and steamboats in the Second Military District. W. E. Martin to B. F. Perry, May 7, 1867 (copy) A. L. Burt Papers, Duke University and cited by Williamson in *After Slavery*, 283.

²⁴ Segregation was re-established on Charleston’s streetcars once again as a company regulation, and not by a state or municipal ordinance. See Gilbert Thomas Stephenson, *Race Distinctions in American Law* (New York, 1910), p. 229.

²⁵ In 1956 the Montgomery bus boycott also only achieved final success with Federal intervention after NAACP legal action brought a court ordered end to segregation on the busses.