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THE PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATS IN CHICAGO, JULY 1944

MILES S. RICHARDS*

IN FEBRUARY 1944, THE COLUMBIA LIGHTHOUSE AND INFORMER, the leading black South Carolina newspaper, endorsed President Franklin D. Roosevelt's reelection to an unprecedented fourth term. While the president was not a clear advocate of civil rights, many African Americans in South Carolina clearly were benefiting from the social welfare programs of the New Deal. John H. McCray, the editor, knew that black South Carolinians, traditional Republicans, had given Roosevelt little organized political support prior to 1944. But he hoped that the growth of a grassroots black movement within South Carolina on Roosevelt's behalf might induce his administration to exhibit a new regard for the racial situation in their state. By creating a popular awareness of national politics among South Carolina's black community that year, McCray sought also to encourage a new determination to secure voting rights in subsequent state elections.

The South Carolina Constitution of 1895 sanctioned various practices that ensured the disenfranchisement of most African Americans. The articles dealing with suffrage (Article II, Section 3) set the following requirements for all voters: a minimum age of twenty-one years; a state residency of two years; a county residency of one year; and the payment of a poll tax six months prior to the general election. The historian, George Tindall observed, "These were calculated to eliminate many Negroes because their migratory habits and to disenfranchise them in November for not paying the poll taxes in May, a time when cash was least available to farmers."¹ However, the chief pitfall in the 1895 Constitution was the literacy test that required black electors to demonstrate proficiency in the reading, besides providing a written explanation, of any section within the state convention.

Even when blacks met the voting standards their power was diluted by exclusion from the Democratic Party's state primary which selected the nominees in this one-party state. Initially, blacks who had voted consistently Democratic since 1876 were eligible to participate in the primary. By the 1940s, though, virtually no black South Carolinian met this stipulation. The existence of the statewide white primary ensured that those few blacks who

* Miles S. Richards is a freelance historian residing in Columbia, SC. This article is part of a larger manuscript concerning Osceola E. McKaine.

¹ George B. Tindall, *South Carolina Negroes, 1877-1900* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1952), 82.

were registered to vote were effectively disenfranchised because they were barred from the only election with any actual significance.²

Despite harassment by local white poll officials, a few black voters continued to vote in federal elections throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. By default, those African Americans participating in electoral politics were Republicans, hardly a viable alternative to South Carolina Democrats in that period.³ During his first term President Roosevelt enjoyed the solid support of white Democrats in South Carolina. But the party's conservative elements became restive over the increasingly liberal slant of the New Deal. They were also upset that African Americans were not being excluded from the benefits of the New Deal's various social programs.⁴



John H. McCray, editor of the *Columbia Lighthouse and Informer*, believed that a black grassroots political movement could spur reform to the state's electoral process. Courtesy of the South Caroliniana Library.

In 1938 Roosevelt attempted to facilitate the defeats of several of his leading southern Democratic critics within the U.S. Senate, including Ellison D. "Cotton Ed" Smith of South Carolina. However, this effort backfired and many Smith supporters became Roosevelt's dedicated enemies. The Democratic Party leadership in South Carolina

remained loyal in the presidential election of 1940, although key figures, such as U. S. Senator James F. Byrnes, later advised Roosevelt that most

² *Ibid.*, 89.

³ *Ibid.*, 89-91

⁴ John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 45-47; John A. Salmond, *A Southern Rebel: The Life and Times of Aubrey Willis Williams, 1890-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 171-173.

white voters in the state still were disturbed over his perceived "softness" on racial matters.⁵

Knowing that various white Democratic leaders opposed another term for Roosevelt in 1944, canny black activists in South Carolina sensed the time was right to demonstrate their commitment to the national party by mobilizing the mass support for Roosevelt among African Americans. In January 1944, Samuel J. McDonald, Sr. of Sumter, the state committee chairman of the South Carolina Conference of the NAACP, proposed that a statewide network of "Fourth Term for Roosevelt Democratic Clubs" be created. Because the majority of leaders in the South Carolina NAACP were loyal Republicans, this proposal was not backed officially by that organization.⁶

A favorable editorial in the *Lighthouse and Informer*, in February, called attention to John H. McCray; consequently, he became regarded as the main public spokesman of this proposed new aggregation. Accordingly, many inquiries about the Fourth Term Clubs were sent to McCray in Columbia from local black leaders across the state.⁷ By mid March, a rudimentary network of black Roosevelt supporters existed in communities throughout South Carolina, which McCray thought foreshadowed a new black political party. This group could spearhead eventually voter registration drives to ensure African-American participation in future Democratic primaries.⁸

As early as 1942, Arthur J. Clement, Jr. of Charleston, an executive with the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, had proposed such an option to McCray, but the latter initially dismissed this notion as impractical. Consequently, Clement was later prone to remind him of this fact.⁹ On March 18, 1944 McCray decided to revive Clement's idea by running an editorial which called for the possible establishment of a South Carolina Negro Democratic Party.

The next morning, Brim Rykard, the city editor of the *Columbia Record*, a daily white newspaper, telephoned McCray seeking permission to reprint

⁵ Robert A. Garson, *The Democratic Party and the Politics of Sectionalism, 1941-1948* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 4-12; David Robertson, *Sly and Able: A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes* (New York: Norton Company, 1994) 252, 289.

⁶ Interview with Modjeska M. Simkins, July 17, 1989. Mrs. Simkins was a longtime African-American political activist from Columbia, South Carolina. She was involved actively in the formation of the Progressive Democratic Party in 1944.

⁷ William M. Bowman to John H. McCray, March 18, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 4, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

⁸ Arthur J. Clement, Jr. to John H. McCray, April 15, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

that editorial within his afternoon issue. Subsequently, McCray's piece was printed under the headline of "Negroes Plan Own Party." Rykard also placed the story upon the Associated Press (AP) wire service, which meant that McCray's proposal received statewide, as well as national exposure.¹⁰

Although committed to Roosevelt's reelection, McCray proposed this new group remain independent of the existing state Democratic Party. Instead, he envisioned a parallel party to the regular organization. The Negro Democrats' structural backbone was to be the system of clubs created, by county, around the state. By March 24, the Richland County Negro Democratic Club, the first, convened an organizational meeting in Columbia. At this conclave, concrete plans were discussed to construct a permanent state party apparatus.¹¹

Black South Carolinians actually were coming late to the effort to open their state's white primary. A suit to that end from Texas already was before the U. S. Supreme Court. On April 3, 1944 the Supreme Court, in the case of *Smith vs. Allwright*, ruled that the Democratic White Primary of Texas was illegal because it violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the Federal Constitution. This precedent obviously applied in every state across the American South. This decision was greeted with angry hysteria throughout these states, including South Carolina. At the urging of such prominent state politicians as House Speaker Solomon J. Blatt, Governor Olin D. Johnston summoned a special session of the South Carolina General Assembly to convene, on April 14, to deal with this new threat to white supremacy.¹²

In his opening address to a joint session of the legislature, Governor Johnston remarked that the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on the Texas primary made it "absolutely necessary that we now repeal all laws pertaining to our primaries in order to maintain white supremacy." He regretted that this drastic action was necessary, but enjoined the legislators that "we must act like men." Johnston was probably referring to the Negro Democrats when he stated: "I regret that certain agitators within South Carolina are taking advantage of this situation to create strife and dissension at the present time ... to further their own selfish gain."

The governor denied that he was pushing this course of action either for personal political reasons or to exacerbate racial tensions. He added this caution, "History has taught us that we must keep our white primaries pure

¹⁰ John H. McCray, "The Skies Did Fall," *Charleston Chronicle*, August 9, 1980, John H. McCray Papers, Box 3.

¹¹ A draft of a report written in April 1944 by John H. McCray. This manuscript is within Box 2 of the John H. McCray Papers.

¹² Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of 'Brown vs. Board of Education' and Black Americans' Struggle for Equality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 299.

and unadulterated events." Accordingly, the governor's legal staff had culled the statute books for all laws that dealt specifically with primary elections. Upon repealing these measures the state Democratic Party would continue "to nominate its candidates free and untrammled without legislative sanction." Should this official tack prove inadequate, he warned that white South Carolinians "will use the necessary methods to retain white supremacy in our primaries." Johnston closed with this declaration: "White supremacy will be maintained in our primaries. Let the chips fall where they may."¹³

While Johnston spoke, a contingent of black activists from Columbia, including McCray and his associate editor, Osceola E. McKaine, watched from the "colored seating" within the public gallery. Many years later, McCray recalled that "brilliant Ossie McKaine" grew visibly angrier as the speech progressed. He also remembered that McKaine angrily described the closing remarks as "a threat of violence upon Negroes—an open invitation to the Klan to get busy!"¹⁴

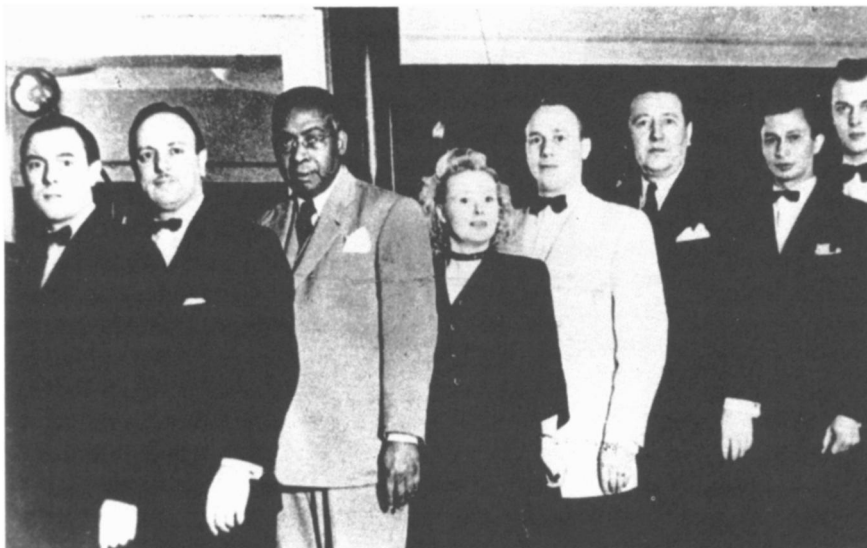
During the next five days these African-American observers witnessed the progress of the session in which two hundred statutes were repealed. Perhaps they knew that clippings from recent issues of the *Lighthouse and Informer* were circulating among the lawmakers to demonstrate the urgency of the situation. Various legislators especially were disturbed that in May the Negro Democrats planned to convene a convention in Columbia and create a formal state organization. An article in McCray's newspaper also reported that the new party intended to run a slate of candidates in the



Gov. Olin D. Johnston (right) vowed that South Carolinians would "use the necessary methods to retain white supremacy in our primaries." From the Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

¹³South Carolina General Assembly, *Journal of the Senate*, "Address of Governor Olin D. Johnston," 85th General Assembly, Special Session, April 14, 1944, 3-5.

¹⁴John H. McCray, "The Need for Changing," [circa 1983], John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.



Osceola E. McKaine (third from left) was associate editor of the *Columbia Lighthouse and Informer* in 1944 and became a key leader in the Progressive Democratic Party.

upcoming November elections. State Representative John D. Long of Union County reminded his colleagues that there were more blacks than whites of voting age in at least nineteen South Carolina counties.¹⁵ This systematic repeal of all statutes dealing with primary elections was called the “South Carolina Plan” by the national press. State leaders were now prepared to maintain the fiction that the Democratic primary was a function of a private fraternal organization. Consequently, internal governing procedures, including the deliberate exclusion of black electors, were legally immune from outside judicial review.¹⁶

Interestingly, one anonymous white political insider demonstrated his opposition to the “South Carolina Plan” by providing timely written advice to McCray, now the acting state chairman of the Negro Democrats. He told McCray, “Your weakest point is that you have not invited white Democrats to vote with you in your independent action.” Accordingly, McCray and his associates appeared to be racially exclusive like their white competitors. “The fact is known everywhere that they have closed their Democratic party

¹⁵ *Spartanburg Journal*, April 16, 1944, Gubernatorial Papers of Olin D. Johnston, Box 1, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.

¹⁶ Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 30.

to you," he added, "and now you are in the same spot as they are." He urged that McCray run an editorial inviting "all whites to join your cause of a united victory for Roosevelt." This unknown white ally ended his missive by declaring, "For a very good reason I am not divulging my name, but the facts above are correct and this is all that matters."¹⁷

McCray and his associates expected to finance the party's activities by raising most funds internally among the various clubs, yet they also sought contributions from outsiders. Although the majority of donors were African Americans, McCray in 1979 recalled that the first independent contribution, amounting to five dollars, was given, on March 22, by Mrs. Margaret Howe, an elderly white widow living on Saluda Street, within a fashionable Columbia neighborhood. Howe had recently returned to her hometown after residing many years in Raleigh, North Carolina, where, during the 1930s, she had belonged to the Commission on Interracial Co-operation, a regional civil rights organization which was defunct by 1944. After reading the newspaper stories the widow sought to help the new party.

During a later conversation, with McCray and McKaine, Mrs. Howe suddenly proposed that the party's name be changed to underscore the goal of achieving an interracial membership. She told them: "It must not be a reactionary party like the one we already have and must be progressive. That's it! Let's name it the Progressive Democrats." The membership later voted to approve Howe's suggestion; therefore, after May 1944, the organization was known formally as the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP).¹⁸

In early May, the Progressive Democratic executive committee voted to convene their initial state convention, if possible, in the State House within the Representatives' chamber. McCray wrote this request to the South Carolina secretary of state, W. P. Blackwell, who as ex officio chairman of the State House and Grounds Commission authorized all such events in that chamber. After a delay of two weeks, Blackwell publicly announced that he had "no authority" to grant McCray's request.¹⁹ Consequently, McCray arranged that the PDP would assemble within the Negro Masonic Temple on Washington Street in Columbia.

The white Democrats had convened their biennial state convention in Columbia in the State House on May 22. Meeting in the Senate Chamber the

¹⁷ An unsigned memorandum to John H. McCray, April 21, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

¹⁸ A formal press statement by John H. McCray, May 2, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2; John H. McCray, "Thirty Glorious Years for Civil Rights," June 18, 1979, John H. McCray Papers, Box 3. The latter document was a draft of a speech that McCray delivered at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.

¹⁹ *Sumter Daily Item*, May 19, 1944.

delegates declared that their party was for white South Carolinians only and “no Negro shall be ever admitted to membership in our party.”²⁰ Two days later, white Democratic leaders began to monitor closely the start of the PDP’s convention.

On May 24, the first convention of the Progressive Democratic Party began at noon. As acting state secretary, McCray presided over an assemblage of 150 delegates representing thirty-eight of South Carolina’s forty-six counties. The first formal business was selecting the convention’s permanent officers. By acclamation, McCray was chosen convention president; therefore, he continued to direct the proceedings. Osceola E. McKaine was among the three persons elected to serve as sessional vice-presidents. Following two hours of “procedural housekeeping” the delegates heard the keynote address which was given by McKaine.²¹

The keynote orator began his speech by saying, “I’m a black man in South Carolina and I’m sure there will be people who will read carefully what I’ve said today.” McKaine assured the delegates that “this was the third [American] revolution and all here are its leaders.” Amidst shouts of “You tell him brother,” he went on to declare: “And we serve notice upon South Carolina’s demagogic, mediocre politicians ... that threats and violence will invoke immediate court action—both state and national.” He denounced Governor Johnston for convening the state legislature in special session “to nullify a lawful decision” of the Supreme Court. “When the courts of a country or state are no longer obeyed,” McKaine opined, “anarchy and violence are bound to follow.”²²

McKaine also told the delegates, “We must, here and now, decide if all Americans living in this state shall be free men ... or spineless serfs.” He said that without the support of “liberal, Christian white people” most African Americans “would have to become bloody revolutionaries.” He endorsed the plan that the Progressive Democrats send a delegation to the upcoming Democratic national convention in Chicago to support Roosevelt’s nomination to a fourth term “in order to continue truly ‘Democratic’ government in this nation.” To loud applause he closed by declaring: “This day will be remembered ... when Negroes allied with liberal whites, and

²⁰ Draft of the final convention statement of the South Carolina Democratic Party State Convention, May 22, 1944, Gubernatorial Papers of Olin D. Johnston, Box 1.

²¹ “A Summary of the Progressive Democratic Convention,” May 24, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

²² “A Summary of the Progressive Democratic Convention,” May 24, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2; *Sumter Daily Item*, 25 May 1944; *Walterboro Press and Standard*, May 25, 1944.

with disinherited [poor] white decided to make this state a decent place to live in. Therefore, on to Chicago, on to the polls, on to Congress, and on to yonder state house!"²³

After McKaine's oration, a series of invited guests, including Noah Griffin, the NAACP's assistant national field secretary, publicly voiced their support of Progressive Democratic Party. But the convention highlight was the unexpected arrival of President James M. Hinton of the South Carolina Conference of the NAACP. Prior to this appearance, Hinton had been an unswerving Republican partisan. In a rousing, impromptu speech Hinton strongly endorsed both the PDP, as well as its goals.²⁴

Because the white Democrats categorically refused even to consider an integrated representation at the national convention, the PDP selected their own delegates. This Progressive Democratic delegation was expected to contest the seating of the rival white contingent as South Carolina's official representatives. Consequently, eighteen PDP delegates, with two alternates, were chosen by their convention's rank-in-file participants. McCray and McKaine were to serve as the delegation's co-chairmen while in Chicago.²⁵ On the final day of the convention McCray received a surprise telephone call from Robert E. Hannegan, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. He requested that the Progressive Democrats send representatives to meet with him in Washington, D. C. within the next three weeks. Accordingly, as a final order of business, the convention designated McCray, Arthur J. Clement, Jr., and the Reverend Roscoe J. Wilson of Florence. "We were firmly admonished, however, that nothing was to prevent the Chicago trip," McCray later wrote.²⁶

White Democratic leaders collectively were determined to demonstrate publicly their disdain of the Progressive Democratic challenge. Those same individuals, though, were not so sanguine in private. On May 29, the party state chairman, Winchester Smith, received a letter from State Supreme Court Justice Eugene S. Blease of Newberry, a brother of the recently deceased former governor and senator, Coleman J. "Coley" Blease. Like his late sibling, Justice Blease was an advocate of white supremacy, as well as a mainstay of an anti-Roosevelt faction within the party's hierarchy. Blease

²³ Draft of Osceola E. McKaine's keynote speech, May 24, 1944, Arthur J. Clement, Jr. Papers, Box 4, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

²⁴ "A Summary of the Progressive Democratic Convention," May 24, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2; *Sumter Daily Item*, May 25, 1944; *Walterboro Press and Standard*, May 25, 1944.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ John H. McCray, "The Skies Did Fall," *Charleston Chronicle*, August 9, 1980, John H. McCray Papers, Box 3.

was disgusted that various party leaders, especially U. S. Senator Burnet R. Maybank, appeared to underestimate the PDP's potential to "kick some dirt" in Chicago. "It has occurred to me ... that our delegation should be prepared properly to meet any contest which may be offered in the event the Negro Party seeks to have us ousted," he remarked. Blease urged, therefore, that State Chairman Smith summon all the official delegates to attend a special strategy meeting in Columbia in late June.²⁷

On June 16, Blease wrote Governor Johnston that several confidential black contacts had told him the Progressive Democrats were waging successfully a statewide effort to raise \$2500 to fund their delegates' expenses for Chicago. Blease said he was dismayed, though, when Winchester Smith had opined that "he saw no good it would do to call our delegates together before going to Chicago."²⁸ And Maybank had informed Blease that, after many discussions with national party officials, the senator was convinced the PDP's challenge would fail. But Blease warned Johnston: "The Progressive Democratic Party intends to press its contest in the National Convention. Likewise, I believe this party is likely to have vital support in certain quarters."²⁹

After attending four previous conventions, Blease knew to expect any eventuality. "Naturally the claim will be made that the recent decision in the Texas case gives them the legal right to demand representation in whole or in part at the Convention," he further noted. Obviously, those northern states with biracial delegations tended to view the PDP with sympathy. Blease also feared that from "their past words and conduct as to racial matters," noted northern white liberals, such as Senator Joseph Guffey of Pennsylvania, intended to support the PDP in any convention floor fight. "It is my candid opinion that if the Negro delegates, or any one of them should be seated in Chicago ... then our entire delegation will withdraw from the convention," Blease told Johnston, "and I am inclined to think that ... several other states may join our delegation...."³⁰ Actually, two days earlier Governor Chauncy Sparks of Alabama in a telegram had made that exact pledge to Johnston.³¹

Certainly Justice Blease's African-American informants' reports were accurate, and by late June the necessary funds had been raised. Moreover,

²⁷ Eugene S. Blease to Winchester Smith, May 29, 1944, Gubernatorial Papers of Olin D. Johnston, Box 1.

²⁸ Eugene S. Blease to Olin D. Johnston, June 16, 1944, Gubernatorial Papers of Olin D. Johnston, Box 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Chauncy Sparks to Olin D. Johnston, June 14, 1944, Gubernatorial Papers of Olin D. Johnston, Box 1.



At Chicago, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), under the leadership of John H. McCray (above), planned to contest the seating of South Carolina's white delegates. Courtesy of South Caroliniana Library.

McCray had contacted the majority of prominent northern black Democrats, who planned to attend the upcoming convention, including Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., then a rising figure in New York City politics. On June 21, McCray told Powell about a rumor that Hannegan, the Democratic national

chairman, intended to block the PDP's effort to gain a hearing with the Convention Credentials Committee. "This is not official, however, and it's my hunch we will at least be heard," he added.³² Progressive Democratic leaders knew that their white rivals were mounting an intense lobbying effort with the Democratic National Committee. McCray had heard from an "unofficial source" that a possible general southern walkout in Chicago was being stressed by these spokesmen.³³

In any case, Hannegan was preoccupied with his efforts to forestall an anticipated bitter showdown between two rival white Texas delegations which were both pressing claims to represent their state in Chicago.³⁴ Hannegan was a prime instigator of the concerted effort to remove Vice-President Henry A. Wallace, an openly anti-racist liberal, from the national ticket. Furthermore, he was attempting to secure that nomination for his longtime political patron, U. S. Senator Harry S. Truman of Missouri. In any case, Hannegan did not want the PDP's challenge complicating the convention proceedings any further.³⁵ As late as the last week in June, therefore, the national chairman remained evasive about scheduling an exact date to meet with the Progressive Democratic emissaries. Consequently, McCray began complaining to Powell that Hannegan was engaged "in the strangest bit of buck passing and dodging of the situation as has been heard of."³⁶

During a stopover in Columbia, Nat J. Humphries, the executive director of the Welfare Equity Association, advised McCray to secure the aid of Representative William L. Dawson of Chicago, an African-American congressman reputedly quite influential with the national Democratic leadership. In a subsequent letter McCray told Dawson, "The fate of the millions in our race rests in the decision for our state and you are the only person we have ... to whom we can appeal." Despite Hannegan's deliberate silence, McCray knew that prominent southern Democrats had tacit assurances from other National Committee members that the PDP's hearing

³² John H. McCray to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., June 21, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

³³ John H. McCray to Joseph A. Rainey, June 24, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

³⁴ George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972), 101.

³⁵ John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 340-341.

³⁶ John H. McCray to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., June 21, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

request would be denied. He asked that Dawson use his influence with Hannegan to help the Progressive Democratic cause.³⁷

Dawson quickly arranged a private meeting between McCray and Hannegan, on July 2, in Washington, D. C., within an office suite at the Willard Hotel. He also recruited two black attorneys from Illinois, Bindley Cyrus and Sydney P. Brown, to serve as legal advisors to the PDP delegates once they were in Chicago. After the initial session with Hannegan, the congressman accompanied the PDP emissary to all the later meetings with national party officials. Although the first discussion remained confidential, it may be assumed that Hannegan tried to dissuade McCray from pressing the seating challenge any further. The two men did agree to another meeting in the near future. McCray later heard that several powerful southern senators had protested bitterly when they learned of this interview.³⁸

McCray, Clement, and Roscoe J. Wilson, the party chairman in Florence County, on July 10, arrived in Washington D. C., where they were met by Dawson. The next morning the four men went to the Mayflower Hotel for the scheduled conclave with Hannegan and Congressman Oscar W. Ewing of New York, the National Committee's vice-chairman. While they had come "to listen hard," the Progressive Democrats stressed also that their delegation definitely was going to Chicago. Ewing reiterated the point that the PDP's seating challenge certainly could provoke a general southern walkout, as well as be quite hurtful to the national party's prospects in the fall elections.

Hannegan eventually promised to arrange for a pre-convention hearing in Chicago, but in return, McCray and his associates "should not allow the Republicans to make capital out of the issue." In reply, Clement asked the question, "Supposing we decide to try working through you to achieve our goals, what assurances do we have that you'll keep your word?" Dawson offered this rebuttal: "Gentleman, a politician who does not keep his word is a dead politician. We are politicians and we are already planning to use the federal courts in South Carolina. And we Democrats control the federal courts."³⁹

On July 13, the majority of the PDP delegation boarded in Columbia a Southern Railway train bound for Chicago. They quickly discovered that several of their white rivals, including Senator Maybank, were also on board. The Progressive Democrats, seated in the day coach section, circulated

³⁷ John H. McCray to William L. Dawson, June 22, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

³⁸ John H. McCray, "The Way It Was," *Charleston Chronicle*, June 23, 1984, John H. McCray Papers, Box 7.

³⁹ John H. McCray, "The Way It Was," *Charleston Chronicle*, November 9, 1985, John H. McCray Papers, Box 7; John H. McCray, "A Report From the State Chairman," July 26, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

freely about the train, whereas, Maybank's entourage remained within their private compartments throughout the trip. A black porter informed McKaine that the senator and company were quite vexed to be in such close proximity to their black competitors.⁴⁰

Upon arriving in the 12th Street Station, the Progressive Democrats were greeted by a black Illinois politician, Edgar W. Brown. He was an emissary of Colonel Robert McCormick, the owner of the *Chicago Tribune*, a newspaper especially noted for its vitriolic editorials against Roosevelt. Brown insinuated that the Democratic leaders were attempting to hide the PDP, by quartering them at the black-owned Alpha Hotel. He also told the South Carolinians that McCormick had reserved a fleet of rooms for them at the Stevens Hotel, the headquarters for the Democratic National Convention. But the PDP delegation personally had selected the Alpha as its base of operations. They were angered when Brown further stated that the press baron was willing to assume all their expenses while in Chicago. McCormick clearly intended to use them as foils in his ceaseless campaign to discredit the president. A caustic Clement "cussed out Brownie," and loudly declaimed to McCray, "Come on, John Henry, let's go to our hotel!"⁴¹

During their first two days in Chicago, the PDP delegation held a series of strategy sessions with Dawson, as well as other prominent black Democrats. They also participated in the African-American lobbying campaign, led by Walter White, the NAACP's national secretary, to retain Vice-President Wallace on the ticket. McKaine was quoted by the *Chicago Defender* as declaring: "We're all for Wallace. We left behind plenty of candidates back in the South. And we didn't come all the way up here to make one of them our next vice-president."⁴² Foremost among those prospective candidates was McKaine's fellow South Carolinian, former U.S. Senator James F. Byrnes.

On July 17, at 4:00 P. M., the Democratic National Committee convened a final pre-convention meeting within the main ballroom of the Stevens Hotel. The first order of business was the South Carolina seating dispute, which Hannegan and his colleagues wanted to settle before confronting the divisive Texas delegate controversy that already was threatening party unity. Instead of referring the matter to the full Credentials Committee, the PDP's challenge was assigned to a special sub-committee of six members, chaired by Ewing. Except for the chairman, this panel was composed of

⁴⁰John H. McCray, "The Way It Was," *Charleston Chronicle*, John H. McCray Papers, June 23, 1984, Box 7.

⁴¹John H. McCray, "The Way It Was," *Charleston Chronicle*, November 9, 1985, John H. McCray Papers, Box 7.

⁴²*Chicago Defender*, July 20, 1944.



U.S. Senator Burnet R. Maybank (above) represented South Carolina's white Democrats at the hearing before a credentials subcommittee to determine which delegation would be seated at the Convention. From the Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

persons residing from the Midwestern and Rocky Mountain states. Within the hour the sub-committee had begun a hearing in a nearby conference room.⁴³

The three spokesmen for the Progressive Democrats were McCray, McKaine, and L. Howard Bennett, a young black attorney from Charleston;

⁴³ "Meeting of the Democratic National Committee," July 17, 1944, *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention: Chicago, Illinois, July 17-21, 1944*, (Washington, D.C.: Democratic National Committee, 1945), 356-358.

moreover, Congressman Dawson was invited to address the panel on their behalf. The main advocate for the white Democrats was Senator Maybank. McCray recalled that Maybank was a polished speaker and presented a more urbane image than most of his white South Carolina compatriots. Ewing later commented that his colleagues were "tremendously impressed with the fairness, the sincerity, and the ability which both sides of this contest presented." But McCray also recollected that periodically the debate became quite rancorous, notably some sharp verbal retorts between Maybank and Dawson.⁴⁴

In his report to the National Democratic Committee Ewing remarked: "The contesting delegation [PDP] exhibited a fine spirit and announced that no matter what happened they were one hundred percent for the re-election of the President." Despite these favorable comments, though, the subcommittee still ruled that the full regular delegation legally represented South Carolina. The white Democratic officials of that state had selected their delegates according to longstanding rules and procedures sanctioned by the national party in past conventions. Without further discussion the National Committee voted to sustain the unanimous recommendation of Ewing's panel.⁴⁵

In 1946, L. Howard Bennett recollected that Hannegan had made several promises in private to McCray after the National Committee's final decision was announced. In exchange for not issuing a floor challenge "the national party would use its influence of official and political resources to help break the lily-white traditions of the Democratic party of South Carolina." He also recalled: "Further, they would see to it that...the Department of Justice and F. B. I. would be at our disposal in all cases where intimidation, coercion, and terrorism were involved...with the efforts of Negroes in South Carolina to cast a ballot." Finally, Bennett believed that financial considerations were discussed as well. "The Party [national] was to make contributions to our organizational efforts within the State," was Bennett's conclusion.⁴⁶

That evening, the Progressive Democratic delegates met in executive session to discuss their options. Apparently, several angry members wanted to "stage a scene" by mounting a formal seating challenge during the first day of the convention. Prospective allies in various state delegations, notably New York, had promised to support such an effort. But the majority of the Progressive Democrats agreed with McCray's assessment that a

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1944, 360-362; John H. McCray, "A Report From the State Chairman," July 26, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ L. Howard Bennett to John H. McCray, November 1, 1946, John H. McCray Papers, Box 3.



Negro delegation from South Carolina, caught by Defender camera upon their arrival at headquarters in the Alpha hotel in Chicago where they held counsel with their attorneys, after they were denied the right to sit in the official South Carolina section at the Democratic convention. They are standing, front row, left to right; Mrs. Lottie P. Gaffney, state committee-woman; Dr. R. J. Wilson, O. E. McKaine, executive secretary; John H. McCray, state chair-

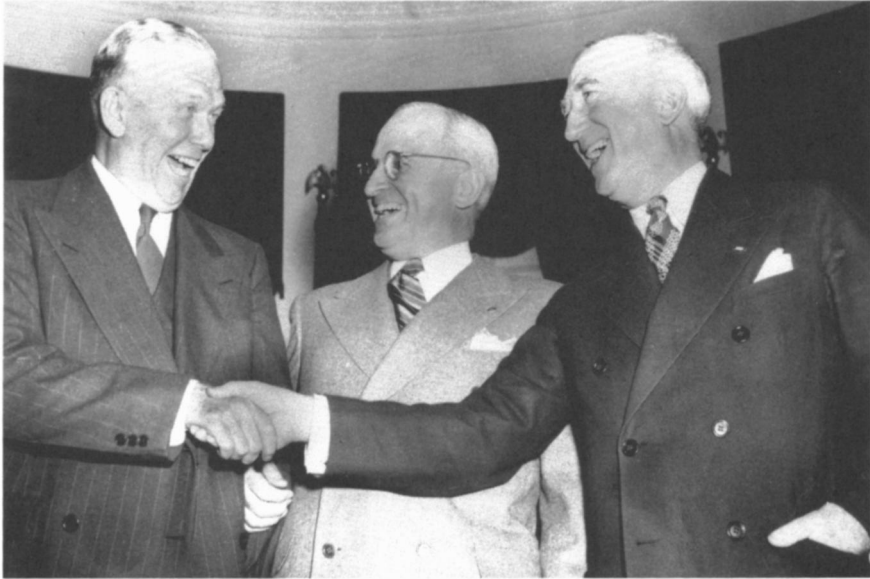
man; Annabelle Weston, state secretary, and Aitys. Bindley Cyrus and Sydney P. Brown, legal advisors to the delegation. Second row: J. C. Brown, J. B. Drake, Levi G. Byrd, J. B. McBride, and James E. Prioleau, second assistant secretary. Third row: A. J. Clement Jr., Mrs. Bessie Brown, David Pugh and Robert F. Morrison. Fourth row: Dr. S. D. Brown, John H. Green and S. C. Blackshear. Top row: Rev. Charles R. Golpin, L. Howard Bennel, and S. J. McDonald.

The Progressive Democratic Delegation shortly after their arrival in Chicago in 1944. Courtesy of the South Caroliniana Library.

divisive floor fight virtually assured a general southern walkout. Both McCray and McKaine believed it imperative to demonstrate their loyalty to President Roosevelt's reelection by not publicly contesting the ruling.⁴⁷ Consequently, this meeting concluded the first modern, concerted attempt by a southern black Democratic organization to win recognition at a national convention.

For the remainder of the convention the PDP contingent watched the proceedings from the Chicago Amphitheater's integrated public gallery. They observed that four South Carolinians were among eighty-nine southerners, from nine states, to cast ballots for the protest presidential candidacy of U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia. And they were disappointed to learn that Harry S. Truman, a comparative political unknown, had replaced Wallace as Roosevelt's running mate. At least the

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*



James F. Byrnes (far right) is pictured in 1947 with President Harry S. Truman and Gen. George Marshall. At Chicago in 1944, Truman beat Byrnes to become Franklin D. Roosevelt's running mate, providing some consolation for the Progressive Democrats. From the Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

Progressive Democrats had the satisfaction of watching that "prize" bypass "Jimmy" Byrnes, a longtime bitter political enemy.⁴⁸

On July 19, McCray issued a press statement which was meant as a challenge to southern white Democrats. Rumors were circulating in Chicago that several southern states, unhappy with the national ticket, planned to designate slates of "independent electors" to the Federal Electoral College, each being uncommitted to any specific presidential candidate. Apparently, various South Carolinians, including Eugene S. Blease, favored that political ploy. As the PDP state chairman, McCray declared: "We serve notice that we shall enter in the fall election a full set of presidential electors ...to prevent traitors to the cause of the Democratic party from turning over South Carolina's electoral vote [eight] to others by fraud and trickery." Being loyal Democrats, McCray and his associates pledged that "we shall fight within our party to drive out the Negro-hating forces who are also conspiring to

⁴⁸ *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention*, 110, 364; Doris E. Saunders, "1944 Pre-Convention Maneuvering: The Day Dawson Saved America From a Racist President," *Ebony*, (July 1972), 37, 42-50.

defeat our national ticket."⁴⁹ Within several weeks, the South Carolina Democratic State Committee, at Governor Johnston's strong insistence, officially abjured the independent elector strategy.

The majority of the Progressive Democrats, on July 25, departed Chicago for home. During the long train ride, McCray, as well as the others had ample opportunity to review their performance at the convention. Furthermore, they considered what concrete plans the PDP could formulate to increase its electoral strength back in South Carolina. The Progressive Democratic state executive committee already had scheduled a statewide voter registration for late July. A month later they also decided to run McKaine as the PDP's candidate in the upcoming federal senatorial race that autumn against Governor Olin D. Johnston. Accordingly, he was destined to become the first black South Carolinian to run for the U.S. Senate since 1872. The Progressive Democrats' work in Chicago, therefore, was only the initial step in an extensive, ongoing campaign of African-American civil rights activism within South Carolina.

⁴⁹ John H. McCray Press Statement, July 19, 1944, John H. McCray Papers, Box 2.