

THE  
AMENIA CONFERENCE

AN HISTORIC NEGRO GATHERING

---

---

By W. E. BURGHARDT DUBOIS



TROUTBECK LEAFLETS  
NUMBER EIGHT

THE  
AMENIA CONFERENCE

AN HISTORIC NEGRO GATHERING

---

*By* W. E. BURGHARDT DUBOIS



TROUTBECK LEAFLETS  
NUMBER EIGHT

AMENIA NEW YORK

PRIVATELY PRINTED AT THE TROUTBECK PRESS  
SEPTEMBER - MDCCCXXV

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

---

IT was in August, 1916, and the place was Troutbeck, near Amenia. I had no sooner seen the place than I knew it was mine. It was just a long, southerly extension of my own Berkshire Hills. There was the same slow, rocky uplift of land, the nestle of lake and the sturdy murmur of brooks and brown rivers. Afar off were blue and mysterious mountains, and there was a road that rose and dipped and wound and wandered and went on and on past farm and town to the great hard world beyond.

There was the village, small, important, complete, with shadows of old homes; with its broad street that was at once thoroughfare, entrance, and exit. There were the people who had always lived there and their fathers before them, and the people merely passing.

Out from the town lay the farm. I saw its great trees bending over the running brook with a sense of utter friendship and intimate memory, though in truth I had never seen it before. And then one could trudge from the more formal home and lawn, by lane and fence with rise and fall of land, until one came to the lake. The lake, dark and still, lay in the

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

palm of a great, calm hand. The shores rose slowly on either side and had a certain sense of loneliness and calm beauty.

It was in 1916. There was war in Europe but a war far, far away. I had discussed it from time to time with a calm detachment. I had said: "A New Year, Comrades! Come, let us sit here high in the Hills of Life and take counsel one with another. How goes the battle there below, down where dark waters foam, and dun dust fills the nostrils, and the hurry and sweat of human kind is everywhere? Evil, evil, yes, I know. Yonder is murder: so thick is the air with blood and groans that our pulses no longer quicken, our eyes and ears are full. Here, to homewards, is breathless gain and gambling and the steady, unchecked, almost unnoticed growth of human hate."

Our own battle in America, that war of colors which we who are black always sense as the principal thing in life, was forming in certain definite lines. Booker Washington was dead. He had died but the year before, 1915. I remember the morning that I heard of it. I knew that it ended an era and I wrote: "The death of Mr. Washington marks an epoch in the history of America. He was the greatest Negro leader since Frederick Douglass, and the most distinguished man, white or black, who has come out of the South since the Civil War. His fame was international and his influence far-reaching. Of

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

the good that he accomplished there can be no doubt: he directed the attention of the Negro race in America to the pressing necessity of economic development; he emphasized technical education, and he did much to pave the way for an understanding between the white and darker races. On the other hand there can be no doubt of Mr. Washington's mistakes and shortcomings: he never adequately grasped the growing bond of politics and industry; he did not understand the deeper foundations of human training, and his basis of better understanding between white and black was founded on caste.

"We may then generously and with deep earnestness lay on the grave of Booker T. Washington testimony of our thankfulness for his undoubted help in the accumulation of Negro land and property, his establishment of Tuskegee and spreading of industrial education, and his compelling of the white South to think at least of the Negro as a possible man. On the other hand, in stern justice, we must lay on the soul of this man a heavy responsibility for the consummation of Negro disfranchisement, the decline of the Negro college and public school, and the firmer establishment of color caste in this land.

"What is done is done. This is no fit time for re-crimination or complaint. Gravely and with bowed head let us receive what this great figure gave of good, silently rejecting all else. Firmly and unfalter-

#### THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

ingly let the Negro race in America, in bleeding Hayti, and throughout the world, close ranks and march steadily on, determined as never before to work and save and endure, but never to swerve from their great goal: the right to vote, the right to know, and the right to stand as men among men throughout the world."

Already we had formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a precarious thing without money, with some influential members, but we were never quite sure whether their influence would stay with us if we "fought" for Negro rights. We started in tiny offices at 10 Vesey Street and then took larger ones at 16. Finally on the eve of the undreamed-of World War we had moved to 70 Fifth Avenue.

There have been many versions as to how this organization was born, all of them true and yet not the full truth. In a sense William English Walling founded it a hundred years after Lincoln's birth, because of his indignation at a lynching in Lincoln's birthplace. But in reality the thing was born long years before when, under the roar of Niagara Falls, there was formed the Niagara Movement by twenty-nine colored men. How they screamed at us and threatened! The *Outlook*, then at the zenith of its power, declared that we were ashamed of our race and jealous of Mr. Washington. The colored press unanimously condemned us and listed our failures.

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

We were told that we were fighting the stars in their courses. Yet from that beginning of the Niagara Movement in 1905 down to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, we were welding the weapons, breasting the blows, stating the ideals, and preparing the membership for the larger, stronger organization. Seven of the twenty-nine went on the first Board of Directors of the N. A. A. C. P., and the rest became leading members.

There came six years of work. It is, perhaps, hard to say definitely just what we accomplished in these six years. It was perhaps a matter of spirit and getting ready, and yet we established the *Crisis* magazine and had it by 1916 almost self-supporting. We had branches of our organization throughout the country. We had begun to move upon the courts with test cases. We had held mass meetings through the country. We had stirred up Congress and we had attacked lynching.

We said in the Sixth Annual Report: "The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was first called into being on the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. It conceives its mission to be the completion of the work which the great emancipator began. It proposes to make a group of 10,000,000 Americans free from the lingering shackles of past slavery: physically free from peonage, mentally free from ignorance, polit-

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

ically free from disfranchisement, and socially free from insult.

"We are impelled to recognize the pressing necessity of such a movement when we consider these facts:

"The lynching of 2,812 prisoners without trial in the last thirty years.

"The thousands of unaccused black folk who have in these years been done to death.

"The widespread use of crime and alleged crime as a source of public revenue.

"The defenseless position of colored women, continually threatened by laws to make their bodies indefensible and their children illegitimate.

"The total disfranchisement of three-fourths of the black voters.

"The new attack on property rights.

"The widespread and growing discrimination in the simplest matters of public decency and accommodation.

"All these things indicate not simply the suffering of a people, but greater than that, they show the impotence of American democracy. And so the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People appeals to the nation to accept the clear and simple settlement of the Negro problem, which consists in treating colored men as you would like to be treated if you were colored."

Our six years of organized work did not by



## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

any means satisfy us. We wanted a bigger, stronger organization, and especially we wanted to get rid of the all too true statement that we were asking for things that colored people did not want or at least did not want with any unity. The wall between the Washington camp and those who had opposed his policies was still there; and it occurred to J. E. Spingarn and his friends that up in the peace and quiet of Amenia and around this beautiful lake, colored men and women of all shades of opinion might sit down and rest and talk and agree on many things if not on all.

The conference, as Mr. Spingarn conceived it, was to be "under the auspices of the N. A. A. C. P." but wholly independent of it, and the invitations definitely said this. They were issued by Mr. Spingarn personally, and the guests were assured that they would not be bound by any program of the N. A. A. C. P. Thus the conference was intended primarily to bring about as large a degree as possible of unity of purpose among Negro leaders and to do this regardless of its effect upon any organization, although, of course, many of us hoped that some central organization and preferably the N. A. A. C. P. would eventually represent this new united purpose.

One can hardly realize today how difficult and intricate a matter it was to arrange such a conference, to say who should come and who should not, to gloss over hurts and enmities. I remember Mr. Spin-

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

garn's asking me with a speculative eye and tentative intonation if the editor of a certain paper ought not to be invited. Now that paper had had an exceedingly good time at my expense, and had said things about me and my beliefs with which I not only did not agree but which gave rise in my hot mind to convictions of deliberate misrepresentation. But after all the editor must come. He was important, and Mr. Spingarn was pleased to see that I agreed with him in this.

About two hundred invitations to white and colored people were actually issued, and in making up this list the advice of friends of Mr. Washington, like Major Moton and Mr. Emmett Scott and Mr. Fred Moore, was sought. There were messages of good will from many who could not attend: from Taft, Roosevelt, Hughes, Woodrow Wilson, and others. But all this selection of persons was the easier part of the thing. The guests had, of course, to be induced to come; fortunately it was possible to accomplish this, and sixty or more persons expressed their willingness to attend. We were going to make for ourselves a little village of tents, and there we had to be fed and amused, while a discreet program was carried out and careful hospitality extended. At this Joel and Amy and Arthur Spingarn and their friends worked long and assiduously, and the result was beautiful and satisfying.

I remember the morning when we arrived. It was

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

misty with a northern chill in the air and a dampness all about. One felt cold and a bit lonely in those high grey uplands. There were only a few there at first, but they filtered in slowly, and with each came more of good cheer. At last we began to have a rollicking jolly time. Now and then, of course, there was just a little sense of stiffness and care in conversation when people met who for ten years had been saying hard things about each other; but not a false word was spoken. The hospitality of our hosts was perfect and the good will of all was evident.

There was a varied company. From the south came Lucy Laney, John Hope, Henry A. Hunt, and R. R. Wright of Georgia; Emmett J. Scott of Alabama, former Secretary of Booker Washington; J. C. Napier of Tennessee. From the west came Francis H. Warren of Detroit, Charles E. Bentley and George W. Ellis of Chicago, Mary B. Talbert of Buffalo, Charles W. Chesnutt of Cleveland, and B. S. Brown of Minnesota. Washington was represented by Mary Church Terrell, James A. Cobb, George W. Cook, Kelly Miller, L. M. Hershaw, Montgomery Gregory, Neval H. Thomas, and J. R. Hawkins. From Pennsylvania came Leslie Hill, L. J. Coppin, R. R. Wright, Jr., and W. Justin Carter. New York sent Fred Moore, Hutchins Bishop, James W. and J. Rosamond Johnson, Addie Hunton, W. L. Bulkley, William Pickens and Roy Nash, then secretary of the N. A. A. C. P. Baltimore gave us Mason Hawkins

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

and Ashbie Hawkins and Bishop Hurst. New England sent William H. Lewis, George W. Crawford, and Garnet Waller.

I doubt if ever before so small a conference of American Negroes had so many colored men of distinction who represented at the same time so complete a picture of all phases of Negro thought. Its very completeness in this respect was its salvation. If it had represented one party or clique it would have been less harmonious and unanimous, because someone would surely have essayed in sheer fairness to state the opinions of men who were not there and would have stated them necessarily without compromise and without consideration. As it was, we all learned what the majority of us knew. None of us held uncompromising and unchangeable views. It was after all a matter of emphasis. We all believed in thrift, we all wanted the Negro to vote, we all wanted the laws enforced, we all wanted assertion of our essential manhood; but how to get these things,—there of course was infinite divergence of opinion.

But everybody had a chance to express this opinion, and at the same time the conference was not made up of sonorous oratory. The thing was too intimate and small. We were too near each other. We were talking to each other face to face, we knew each other pretty intimately, and there was present a pervading and saving sense of humor that laughed

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

the poseur straight off the rostrum and that made for joke and repartee in the midst of serious argument. Of course and in fact let us confess here and now that one thing helped everything else: We were gloriously fed. There was a great tent with tables and chairs which became at will now dining-room, now auditorium. Promptly at meal time food appeared, miraculously steaming and perfectly cooked, out of the nothingness of the wide landscape. We ate hilariously in the open air with such views of the good green earth and the waving waters and the pale blue sky as all men ought often to see, yet few men do. And then filled and complacent we talked awhile of the thing which all of us call "The Problem", and after that and just as regularly we broke up and played good and hard. We swam and rowed and hiked and lingered in the forests and sat upon the hillsides and picked flowers and sang.

Our guests dropped by, the governor of the state, a member of Congress, a university president, an army officer, a distinguished grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, a Harlem real estate man, business men, and politicians. We had the women there to complete the real conference, Mrs. Terrell, Mary B. Talbert, Mrs. Hunton, Lucy Laney, Dr. Morton Jones of Brooklyn; Inez Milholland, in the glory of her young womanhood dropped by, in this which was destined to be almost the last year of her magnificent life. Mrs. Spingarn strolled over now and

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

then and looked at us quietly and thoughtfully.

The Amenia Conference in reality marked the end of an era and the beginning. As we said in our resolutions: "The Amenia Conference believes that its members have arrived at a virtual unanimity of opinion in regard to certain principles and that a more or less definite result may be expected from its deliberations. These principles and this practical result may be summarized as follows:

"(1) The conference believes that all forms of education are desirable for the Negro and that every form of education should be encouraged and advanced.

"(2) It believes that the Negro, in common with all other races, cannot achieve its highest development without complete political freedom.

"(3) It believes that this development and this freedom cannot be furthered without organization and without a practical working understanding among the leaders of the colored race.

"(4) It believes that antiquated subjects of controversy, ancient suspicions and factional alignments must be eliminated and forgotten if this organization of the race and this practical working understanding of its leaders are to be achieved.

"(5) It realizes the peculiar difficulties which surround this problem in the South and the special need of understanding between leaders of the race who live in the South and those who live in the North.

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

It has learned to understand and respect the good faith, methods and ideals of those who are working for the solution of this problem in various sections of the country.

“(6) The conference pledges itself to the inviolable privacy of all its deliberations. These conclusions, however, and the amicable results of all the deliberations of the conference are fair subjects for discussion in the colored press and elsewhere.

“(7) The conference feels that mutual understanding would be encouraged if the leaders of the race could meet annually for private and informal discussion under conditions similar to those which have prevailed at this conference.”

It is a little difficult today to realize why it was necessary to say all this. There had been bitterness and real cause for bitterness in those years after the formation of the Niagara movement and before the N. A. A. C. P. had come to the front. Men were angry and hurt. Booker Washington had been mobbed by Negroes in Boston, Monroe Trotter had been thrown in jail; the lowest motives that one can conceive had been attributed to antagonists on either side—jealousy, envy, greed, cowardice, intolerance, and the like. Newspapers and magazine articles had seethed with threat, charge, and innuendo.

Then there had been numberless attempts at understanding which had failed. There was, for instance, that conference in Carnegie Hall when

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

Andrew Carnegie through Booker T. Washington financed a general meeting of Negro leaders. It was a much larger conference than that at Amenia but its spirit was different. It was a conference carefully manipulated. There was no confidence there and no complete revelation. It savored more of armed truce than of understanding. Those of us who represented the opposition were conscious of being forced and influenced against our will. Lyman Abbott of the *Outlook* came and talked with us benevolently. Andrew Carnegie himself came. Numbers of rich and powerful whites looked in upon us and admonished us to be good, and then the opposition between the wings flamed in bitter speech and charge. Men spoke with double tongues saying one thing and meaning another. And finally there came compromise and an attempt at constructive effort which somehow no one felt was real. I had proposed a Committee of Twelve to guide the Negro race, but when the committee was finally constituted I found that it predominately represented only one wing of the controversy and that it was financed indirectly by Andrew Carnegie, and so I indignantly withdrew and the Committee of Twelve never functioned but died leaving only a few pamphlets which Hugh Brown edited. There were other efforts, but it needed time and understanding, and when the Amenia Conference came the time was ripe.

We talked of many matters at Amenia—of educa-



## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

tion, politics, organization, and the situation in the South. First of all we spoke of the former subjects of controversy; then we made the deliberations private, and to this day there is no record of what various persons said; and finally we declared for annual meetings of the conference, and then we got to the main subjects of controversy.

If the world had not gone crazy directly after the Amenia Conference and indeed at the very time of its meeting had not been much more widely insane than most of us realized, it is probable that the aftermath of this conference would have been even greater than we can now see. It happened because of the War that there was but the one conference held at Amenia. While we were there the world was fighting and had fought two long years. In another year America was destined to join the war and the Negro race was to be torn and shaken in its very heart by new and tremendous problems. The old order was going and a new race situation was to be developed.

Of all this the Amenia Conference was a symbol. It not only marked the end of the old things and the old thoughts and the old ways of attacking the race problem, but in addition to this it was the beginning of the new things. Probably on account of our meeting the Negro race was more united and more ready to meet the problems of the world than it could possibly have been without these beautiful

## THE AMENIA CONFERENCE

days of understanding. It was a "Close ranks!" before the great struggle that issued in the new world. How appropriate that so tremendous a thing should have taken place in the midst of so much quiet and beauty there at Troutbeck, which John Burroughs knew and loved throughout his life, a place of poets and fishermen, of dreamers and farmers, a place far apart and away from the bustle of the world and the centers of activity. It was all peculiarly appropriate, and those who in the future write the history of the way in which the American Negro became a man must not forget this event and landmark in 1916.

*Troutbeck Leaflets are devoted to a single spot of American earth and to those who have touched its life. Of this eighth number (which describes the "Amenia Conference" held in tents pitched on the shores of Troutbeck Lake on August 24-26, 1916) two hundred copies have been printed for private distribution.*