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Blacks and Voting Rights in Nevada

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Blacks and Voting Rights in Nevada *By Professor Rachel J. Anderson*

Black suffrage and access to equal rights have been central to Nevada law and politics from the beginning. Civic engagement by Blacks in Nevada to achieve full participation in and enjoyment of national life has also been a part of the culture of Nevada since the beginning.

In 1861, the First Territorial Legislature limited voting rights to white men over the age of twenty-one, who met citizenship and residency requirements. That law disenfranchised the forty-four Blacks living in the territory, roughly one-fifth of the population recorded in the 1860 Nevada census.

Three years later when Nevada was admitted as a state in 1864, as non-citizens Blacks remained disenfranchised under the Nevada Constitution. In response, Blacks in Nevada began what has become a long tradition of civic activism through community organizations. By 1865 Blacks in Virginia City, Nevada, had formed the Nevada

Executive Committee, a nongovernmental civic organization, and began petitioning the Nevada Legislature for voting rights.

Once Black men obtained the right to vote in 1870 with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment by the U.S. Congress, records show that Black men in Nevada exercised their right to vote in the 1870 election. They also coordinated their political action through organizations like the Lincoln Union Club in Virginia City, the Elko Republican Club, and the Colored Hayes and Wheeler Club in Carson City. The fact that women did not have the same voting rights as men was not overlooked as evidenced by a debate on “Women’s Enfranchisement” at a meeting in 1870.

By November 2012, there were 1,299,126 people legally entitled to vote in Nevada. African Americans make up approximately 8.5% of the voting-age population.

Black Politics in Las Vegas in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

By Claytee D. White

The black community has always shown a higher level of political engagement than might be expected based on its proportional percentage of the Nevada population. In 1926, the same year the local NAACP was formed, and again in 1930 records show that at least one black, Mark Withers, ran for office even when 1920 census records show a population of 52 African Americans of which twelve or 23% owned property.

Shortly thereafter, a 1928 newspaper report showed that the black population was increasing steadily resulting in a rapid growth in the vital role of electoral politics. The growing black community gathered for political discussions at the home of A.B. Mitchell, an African American who owned a “fine story and a half ranch house” where “[s]ome 200 prominent ... colored voters [met] the Republican candidates ... for the purpose of discussing campaign issues.”

A desire for access to employment has also played a role in coalescing black political interests. Rumors about the possible

construction of a dam in the area contributed to the formation of a labor organization along with a rash of political groups geared toward helping the black community ensure the placement of candidates who would vote according to the community’s needs and aspirations.

Blacks in the 1920s and 1930s saw their ability to persuade in the simple arithmetic of their educated electorate. The black community of 2012 strives to place candidates in office for the same reason. According to Assemblyman William Horne, a district’s residents “need a representative who will listen to them and understand their issues and serve them well in the legislature.” By 1932, other black groups had gradually formed such as a Citizens Labor Protection Association, a Roosevelt Club, and a Colored Republican Club. In August of the same year, the Roosevelt Democratic Club held its first meeting.

The 1932 election year can be compared with 2012 in ways that explain the wave

of political organizations among such a small population. President Hoover, the Republican incumbent ran against Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). In the midst of the Great Depression, the Republican platform called for, among others issues, sharp cutbacks in federal expenditures, further curbs in immigration, and continued support for high protective tariffs. Democrats wanted extensive banking and financial reform including regulation of the stock exchanges as one plank in their platform. FDR’s New Deal policies attracted blacks away from the party of Lincoln.

Although the first black elected to the Nevada Legislature in 1966 was a Republican, Assemblyman Woodrow Wilson who served from 1967 until 1971, most black Nevada legislators since then have been democrats. That includes Senator Bernice Mathews, the first black female legislator, who was elected to the State Senate in 1994. In 2012, the majority of blacks in Nevada are still members of the Democratic Party.

Blacks in Nevada Elections

By Professor Rachel J. Anderson

Over the years, Blacks have faced many uphill battles in Nevada elections. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, William M. Bird ran for mayor of Virginia City in the 1870 election. Mr. Bird was a well-known local barber and had been a political activist at a national level. Despite his popularity and position as an influential member of the Black community, Mr. Bird was subjected to disproportionately negative coverage in the local print media and a paucity of neutral or positive coverage. This and other challenges that have been present since statehood continue to be hurdles for Black candidates in Nevada to this day.

However, persistence, strategy, hard work, and being a qualified candidate can pay off. Over the years a small but growing number of Blacks, among them LVNBA members, have been elected to statewide and local offices in Nevada. In the 2012 election cycle, a number of LVNBA members ran for public office. They included Justice Michael Douglas, Senator Aaron Ford, Assemblyman Jason



Attorney Berna Rhodes-Ford organizes numerous election events each year. © Berna Rhodes-Ford, used with permission

Frierson, Assemblyman William Horne, Attorney Phung Jefferson, Attorney Jonathan MacArthur, Assemblywoman Dina Neal, and Attorney Marsha Kimble Simms.

LVNBA Members also participated in the 2012 elections by disseminating information about voting rights, registering voters, offering their offices for the training of election observers, poll watching, driving voters to the polls, answering calls in the Obama campaign boiler room and on voter information hotlines, and hosting debate watch events and open forum discussions.



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Claytee White is a historian and the Director of the Oral History Research Center at UNLV Libraries. She received her bachelor's degree from California State University Los Angeles, master's degree in history from UNLV, and has completed work toward a doctorate at the College of William & Mary.

Selected Sources for the Nevada 2012 Special Series

Books

Earnest N. Bracey, *The Moulin Rouge and Black Rights In Las Vegas: A History of the First Racially Integrated Hotel-Casino* (2009).

Effie Mona Mack, *Nevada: A History of the State from the Earliest Times Through the Civil War* (1936).

Elmer R. Rusco, "Good Time Coming?," *Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century* (1975).

Jerry L. Simich & Thomas C. Wright, *The Peoples Of Las Vegas: One City, Many Faces* (2005).

Nevada State Bar Magazine

Rachel J. Anderson, *Timeline of African-American Legal History in Nevada* (1861-2011), *Nevada Lawyer*, Feb. 2012, at 8.

Richard Boulware, *Dedicated to Excellence: National Bar Association, Las Vegas Chapter*, *Nevada Lawyer*, Feb. 2012, at 26.

Claytee White & Geralda Miller, *Charles L. Kellar: Legal Trailblazer in Nevada*, *Nevada Lawyer*, Feb. 2012, at 20.

Oral History Transcripts

Oral histories from interviews of Aaron Ford, William Horne, and Joseph M. Neal, Jr. on October 5-9, 2012 housed at the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association (LVNBA) Archive at the Wiener-Rogers Law Library at the UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law and the African-American History Collaborative Collection at the Oral History Research Center at UNLV Libraries Special Collections.

Newspaper Articles

THE EVENING REVIEW JOURNAL, 22 July 1930 and Clark County, Nevada 1910 Federal Census (transcribed by Patricia A. Scott & proofread by Daniel A. Scott for the USGenWeb Census Project), available at <http://ftp.us-census.org/pub/ungenweb/census/nv/clark/1920/>.

"A.B. MITCHELL RANCH BEING BROUGHT UNDER CULTIVATION," LAS VEGAS AGE, MAR. 3, 1923.

"COLORED FOLK ENJOY PICNIC," LAS VEGAS AGE, OCT. 30, 1928.

Web-Based Resources

Election of 1932: Changing the Guard, History Program, www.AMUOnline.com/History, at <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h894.html> (last visited Oct. 9, 2012).