

A Black Vice President in the Gilded Age? Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce and the National Republican Convention of 1880

by Nicholas Patler

It was a surprise ending to the most intense and drawn out Republican nominating convention in American history. The Republican candidate for president in 1880 would not be former two-term President Ulysses S. Grant whose nomination many thought to be sealed in fate. Nor would it be the well-known power broker James G. Blaine, or Secretary of the Treasury John Sherman, who was touted as a good prospect. Instead, the Republican nominee would be a dark horse from Ohio named James A. Garfield. Amazingly, Garfield came from way behind with only one vote on the thirty-third ballot to a crushing 399 votes three ballots later that catapulted him over the convention elites to secure the nomination.¹

¹ Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of President James A. Garfield* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 78-135; The (Richmond, VA) *Daily Dispatch* reported “so universal is the belief that Grant will be the nominee of the Chicago convention that the anticipation is likely to lead largely to the event,” May 31, 1880; *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 4, 1880, and June 9, 1880; Manchester (England) *Guardian*, June 7, 1880; Herbert J. Clancy, *The Presidential Election of 1880* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1958), 49, 114-16. More presidential ballots by far were cast at the Republican National Convention of 1880 than in any Republican national convention before or after. Coming in a distant second were the ten ballots it took to secure the nomination of Warren G. Harding in 1920. See *National Party Conventions, 1831-1980* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1983), 9.

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When it came time for the convention delegates to choose a vice president to run with Garfield, another unheralded candidate surfaced. Delegates from state-after-state voted overwhelmingly for Chester A. Arthur of New York—a lesser-known politician who had skirted charges of corruption, which still hovered over him from the time he was dismissed as the collector of customs in New York City.²

The strangest phenomenon at the National Republican Convention of



Mississippi Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce

1880 in Chicago, however, had little to do with white candidates vying for power. On the evening of Tuesday, June 8, during the official roll call for vice president, eight delegates from four states—Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Louisiana—cast their votes not for Arthur but instead for Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce of Mississippi, an African American delegate who had earlier presided over part of the convention. Making this action all the more remarkable, numerous African American delegates from Mississippi and other southern states, and quite possibly even some white as well as black delegates from northern states, also wanted to cast their votes for Bruce, but it appears they were talked out of it by Bruce and/or his colleagues.³

² George Frederick Howe, *Chester A. Arthur: A Quarter-Century of Machine Politics* (New York: Doff, Mead & Company, 1934), 108-110; Ackerman, 129-3; Clancy, 117-19; "Hayes' Opinion of Arthur," Staunton (VA) *Spectator*, June 15, 1880.

³ *Official Report of the Proceedings of the National Republican Conventions of 1868, 1872, 1876, and 1880* (Minneapolis: Charles W. Johnson, Publisher, 1903), 639-40, 644, 658-62, 669. "Senator Bruce," *Topeka Kansas Herald*, June 11, 1880; Sadie Daniel St. Clair, *The National Career of Blanche Kelso Bruce* (Ph.D. diss., New York University,

Although Bruce's eight votes (or even a potential two dozen or so more) fell far short of the 376 needed to win, the fact that a black man in xenophobic 1880 America was seriously considered by his peers as their choice for vice president of the United States is incredible to say the least. Forever recorded in the *Official Proceedings of the National Republican Convention of 1880*, Bruce became the only African American in history to receive delegate votes at one of the main party's national conventions, with the exception of Frederick Douglass who got one vote as a presidential pick in 1888. Moreover, Bruce came out ahead of four other white politicians who had also garnered a few delegate votes as vice presidential long shots, one of whom had his name proposed and seconded as a presidential hopeful.⁴

This essay will consider the remarkable events that lead up to Senator Bruce's votes at the National Republican Convention of 1880 and attempt to explain his support, both at the convention and in the nation at large, within the context of his life—including his rise from slavery to the United States Senate. Bruce's election to the Senate in 1874 and subsequent six-year term propelled him into national prominence, particularly in the African American community, and was largely responsible for whatever degree of popularity he enjoyed at the Republican convention in 1880. With this in mind, Bruce's Senate career will be briefly reconsidered and revised from the general historical consensus that has portrayed his service as uninspiring.⁵ Finally, this article will take into

1947), 160-61. Melvin I. Urofsky, "Blanche K. Bruce: United States Senator, 1875-1881," *The Journal of Mississippi History* 29 (May 1967): 128; Ackerman, 130-31.

⁴ *Official Report*, 634-35, 644. Although he did not attend the National Republican Convention of 1888, held again in Chicago, Bruce received eleven votes for vice president—the second and only other time he would receive delegate votes. In addition to Bruce and Douglass, other African Americans were proposed as potential vice presidential candidates at Republican national conventions in the latter nineteenth century, but none received actual delegate votes. African Americans, however, have been nominated or chosen to run on alternative or third party tickets since as early as 1860 for both president and vice president. In 1872, for example, suffragette Victoria Woodhull ran for president on the Equal Rights Party ticket with Frederick Douglass as her vice presidential candidate. See Eileen Shields-West, *The World Almanac of Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Scripps Howard Co., 1992), 97.

⁵ There seems to be little consensus on who Blanche Kelso Bruce actually was, with many historians concluding more or less that he was an elite with minimal concern for or connection to the black masses. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to fully examine Bruce's life and career, his role as a black leader in late nineteenth century America will be reconsidered and revised within the context of this article.

account some of the colorful personalities of the Gilded Age⁶ such as New York Senator Roscoe Conkling, the adventurous renaissance man and first black member of the Ohio state legislature, George Washington Williams, Senator George Frisbie Hoar of Massachusetts, and Prince Leopold of England, who in some way provided part of the impetus and backdrop to Bruce's delegate support at the Chicago convention.

The United States Senate gallery was packed with spectators stretching their necks and shifting their bodies to catch a glimpse of the extraordinary events unfolding on the floor below. They watched as newly elected Senators entered the chamber and walked the aisle to power—the culmination of which would be realized when they reached Vice President Henry Wilson who officially swore them in.

There was nothing unusual about this process. It was the route of official protocol that all their predecessors—Senators of past and present—had walked as well. But on this day, March 6, 1875, there was something remarkably unique happening on the floor, which had much of Washington and the nation bursting with curiosity and anticipation. The presence here of two Senators-elect, indeed two underdogs, promised to make this swearing-in ceremony the most unusual and perhaps the most controversial in history.

The entrance of one of these, a man who had become an icon both at home and abroad, stirred the Senate gallery and captured the imagi-

⁶The term "Gilded Age" was coined by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their novel by the same name. Although fictional, it was a critique of the outwardly extravagant but inwardly corrupt nature of contemporary American business and politics; generally understood to be from the 1870s to 1900 or so. Perhaps less popular than other eras of American history (due in part to the relative decline in power and initiative of the U.S. presidency), the Gilded Age was extremely important to the growth and development of the American economy, particularly in regard to the rise of corporations and transportation infrastructures. Yet paradoxically, here also lies the basis for the soiled reputation of this era. Big business and politics sometimes became linked resulting in the exploitation of power and resources on both sides. For example, in what was known as the Credit Mobilier scandal, stockholders of the Union Pacific Railroad sold or gave shares of their stock to influential congressmen who helped themselves by approving federal subsidies for the cost of railroad construction without paying much attention to expenses. Implicated in the scandal were politicians such as James A. Garfield, Vice President Schuyler Colfax (Grant's first term), Vice President-elect Henry Wilson (Grant's second term), and several other political figures. Almost any politician or office-holder of the day, whether involved in these scandals or not, rarely escaped the whipping post of malicious accusations by their opponents. For a concisely negative and colorful summary of the Gilded Age, see Eileen Shields-West, *World Almanac*, 100.

nations of many Americans. Former president Andrew Johnson, who only five years earlier had missed impeachment by one vote and was viciously written off as politically dead by leaders and journalists alike, had been resurrected by the Tennessee legislature in the fall of 1874. Following his turbulent presidency, he quit politics and had gone back to his quiet home, rolled up his sleeves, and worked his garden. But he was not ready to give up and, against all odds,



Mississippi Senator Hiram Rhodes Revels

he made his way back to Washington. Entering the Senate chamber that day, Johnson strolled past several of his soon-to-be colleagues who had voted to impeach him and took his seat among former enemies. Once vilified, the press now praised the former president for his courage and ability to make such a miraculous comeback.⁷

The most unusual scene in the Senate that day, however, was the swearing in of a black man from Mississippi, Blanche Kelso Bruce. Much like Andrew Johnson, Bruce's arrival in the Senate chamber on March 6 was a sight that most Americans, only a decade earlier, could have hardly dreamed. Although fellow Mississippian Hiram Revels had been elected to complete a vacated term in 1870-71, making him the first African American U.S. Senator in history, Bruce became the first to serve a full six-year term and the only African American to serve again until Edward Brook's election in Massachusetts in 1966.

⁷ Lately Thomas, *The First President Johnson: The Three Lives of the Seventeenth President of the United States of America* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1968), 629-32; Robert W. Winston, *Andrew Johnson: Plebian and Patriot* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1969), 500-05; Kenneth E. Mann, "Blanche Kelso Bruce: United States Senator Without A Constituency," *Journal of Mississippi History* 38 (May, 1976): 183. U.S. Senators were chosen by their state legislatures until the ratification of the 17th Amendment in 1913, which then required their election by popular vote.

Born and raised a slave, Bruce entered his freedom with a remarkable confidence that he could, despite generations of oppression, not to mention the stigma of his color and former bondage, penetrate the world of white Reconstruction politics. His experience in slavery, first in Farmville, Virginia, a rural farming community sixty miles southwest of Richmond, where he was born, then Mississippi, from there to Missouri, and later back to Virginia, was not as harsh as it had been for others. He had learned to read and seems to have held a privileged status as did many light-skinned slaves, more than likely because his white owner was also his father.⁸

The political journey to the United States Senate for Bruce was fast by any standard of the day, incredibly swift considering he was an African American just out of slavery. Add to this the fact that while the United States House of Representatives and southern state legislatures accommodated numerous elected African Americans during the Reconstruction Era, the Senate remained a body of almost total white power.

From the very beginning the young Blanche had innocuously challenged the restrictions on upward mobility for African Americans. His political contemporaries were impressed by his dignity, elegant manners, and friendly disposition. He stood more than six feet in height and was heavysset with olive skin and chiseled features, and he sometimes wore a fashionable goatee. While Bruce's approachable personality masked his ambition, he, like other African American leaders during the Reconstruction Era, strategically yet calmly made his political moves with an eye on national power, even to the point of turning down the lieutenant-governorship of Mississippi, which may have paved his way to the governor's mansion, because he was determined to go to the United States Senate instead.⁹

The journey for the "slave boy who rose to Senator," as the *New York Times* would later describe his rise to power, began in 1861 when Bruce emancipated himself by fleeing to Lawrence, Kansas. From there, he went to Hannibal, Missouri, where he organized one of the first schools

⁸ "They Had A Dream: Blanche Bruce—the Silent Senator," *Washington Evening Star*, January 9, 1971; Mann, "Blanche Kelso Bruce," 184. Farmville, Virginia, is in Prince Edward County, whose school system later became one of the test cases in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

⁹ George F. Hoar, *Autobiography of Seventy Years*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner Sons, 1903), 59-60.

in the country for African Americans. After the Civil War, Bruce did a stint at Oberlin College and shortly after took a job on a riverboat where he heard travelers tell stories of a land of opportunity for adventurous men in post-war Mississippi. Bruce soon made a visit to the state where at a speaking event he met the Republican candidate for governor and soon-to-be force in Mississippi reconstruction politics, James Lusk Alcorn. Impressed by young Blanche, Alcorn persuaded him to try his luck in the Magnolia State.¹⁰

Moving to Floreyville (now known as Rosedale), Mississippi in 1868, a small Bolivar County town located on the Mississippi river across from Arkansas, Bruce, making quick friends with state power brokers, moved rapidly up the ladder of local and state politics. His first appointment came when military governor General Adelbert Ames appointed him conductor of elections for Tallahatchie County. The following year Bruce moved back to Bolivar County, where blacks far outnumbered whites, and where for the next six years he held one appointment and elected office after another, amassing a small fortune as a planter, which established him as a landowner and helped lend credibility to his political aspirations. By 1874, Bruce was well known—and most importantly well liked—in Mississippi political circles, and his dexterity in assuaging the racial prejudices and fears of white southerners, along with shrewd political maneuvering on his part (and the Mississippi black caucus), opened the door for his election to the United States Senate.¹¹

¹⁰ “Bruce, the Colored Senator: His Chivalrous Deed in Behalf of a Distressed Southern Lady,” *The (Springfield, Mass.) Republican*, July 6, 1878, and “Slave Boy Who Rose to Senator Recalled as Date of Birth Nears,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1937, in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Mann, “Blanche Kelso Bruce,” 184.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; and Samuel Shapiro, “A Black Senator from Mississippi: Blanche K. Bruce (1841-1898),” *The Review of Politics* 44 (University of Notre Dame: January, 1982): 87; Mann, “Blanche Kelso Bruce,” 184-86; “B.K. Bruce, Register: The Great Secret of His Successful Career,” *New York Age*, December 9, 1897, Bruce Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Here Robert Terrell, future appointed judge in the District of Columbia, and husband of Mary Church Terrell, the first black female District of Columbia school board member and African American leader, paints a very favorable portrait of Bruce by emphasizing his magnetic personality. One of Bruce’s contemporaries and resident of Bolivar County, Mississippi, later reminisced, “He was always courteous and respectful in his demeanor towards the southern gentlemen,” in F.W. Sillers, *History of Bolivar County, Mississippi* (Jackson, Miss.: 1948), 590. Also, an interesting quote by one southern white newspaper in Natchez, Mississippi, reprinted in a later article in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, stated upon Bruce’s death, “he commanded the



Mississippi Senator James Lusk Alcorn

With the crowded Senate gallery looking on, the secretary called the name of Blanche Kelso Bruce. The thirty-four year old Senator-elect arose from his seat and began to slowly make his way down the aisle for the swearing in ceremony. Although it was customary for the senior senator—in this case, James L. Acorn—to accompany the newly elected Senator from his state down the path of power, Senator Alcorn refused to leave his seat or even look at

his soon-to-be colleague. In an

awkward moment, Bruce hesitated, but was soon rescued by the New York Senator Roscoe Conkling, described as the “haughtiest and most aloof member” of the Senate, who stepped briskly into the aisle, and said, “Excuse me, Mr. Bruce, I did not until this moment see that you

respect and confidence not only of those of his race and party, but of the white Democrats as well,” James M. Rosbrow, “Blanche K. Bruce Led one of the Most Remarkable Careers in American History,” September 9, 1945, Bruce Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. For a few examples of shrewd political maneuvering, at least a year before Bruce’s election by the Mississippi state legislature to the United States Senate, he, along with black powerbrokers in the state including James Hill and John Roy Lynch, worked behind the scenes to drum up the support of black and white Republicans in the legislature. Hill is alleged to have told Bruce, “I can and will put you there. No one can defeat you.” They also got the support of other state leaders, including Governor Adelbert Ames. Although Republicans had solid majorities in both branches of the Mississippi legislature, with African Americans accounting for over a third of the Republicans in the Senate and three-fourths in the House, it appears that Bruce was still determined to make sure that he had the support of his party. Using his power as an elected sheriff of Bolivar County, shortly before the election Bruce allowed thirty-three members of the House and three senators to cash in their state warrants, something of dubious legality, as these warrants were supposed to be used for tax payments. Bruce was elected by a vote of 146 to 99. See Shapiro, *The Review of Politics*, 87-88, and Mann, “Blanche Kelso Bruce,” 186.

were without an escort, permit me. My name is Conkling,” and he linked arms with Bruce as they made their way to the front.¹²

Senator Conkling had a reputation in the Senate for being quick tempered, hypersensitive, controlling, and disdainful of opponents—though “there was something almost sublime in his lofty disdain,” one of his contemporaries later reminisced. He was one of the most successful politicians in New York history, and maintained a tight grip on the power base of the most influential state, and one that could potentially determine a presidential election in a close race—a likely scenario in the contested elections of the Gilded Age (New York, in fact, would be one of two key states deciding the election of 1880). But Conkling was also considered to have been one of the most intelligent men of his time, always troubled over the impoverished economic and social conditions in which many minorities and poor whites in America lived. It was natural for him to feel for Bruce standing all alone on the Senate floor, and doubly good for Conkling because not only could he help a man in need, but in doing so rub it in the faces of his less tolerant colleagues.¹³

With Senator Bruce’s entrance into national politics came also his entrance into Washington’s elite black society. Still a bachelor upon his arrival, he was an immediate favorite of the single ladies among the city’s black aristocrats. “Smitten by his good looks and polished manners,” said Willard B. Gatewood, “they vied with each other in attracting his attention and interest.” The ladies found Bruce’s good nature and joking disposition, along with his ability not to take himself so seriously

¹² James M. Rosbrow, “Senator From Mississippi,” Associated Press article, 1927, in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; David M. Jordan, *Roscoe Conkling of New York: Voice in the Senate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 432; Mann, “Blanche Kelso Bruce,” 183-84; Shapiro, *The Review of Politics*, 89.

¹³ “Roscoe Conkling,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 1891, Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Howard University, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Hoar, vol. 2, 59: Here Senator George Frisbie Hoar says that although Conkling was hard to get along with, he was nevertheless “fearless,” “a powerful debater,” and a true patriot. For close elections on the national level during the Gilded Age, see the heated and highly controversial election of 1876 and the hairsbreadth elections of 1880 and 1884 in which the victor, although receiving a substantial electoral vote, won by less than one percent of the popular vote. See Shields-West, 101-15.

in their presence, a welcome change from the pretentious manner of other elite single men.¹⁴

Bruce also made his way into white social and political circles in the capital city, where he won many influential white friends, some of whom had been introduced to him by his roommate during his bachelor days in Washington, Frederick Douglass. But there was a color barrier to be sure. Many whites, including politicians, would never consent to Bruce in their presence as a presumed equal. While late-1870s Washington was somewhat flexible and accommodating to elite African Americans in regard to interaction and contact with influential whites, including President Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-81) who welcomed Senator Bruce (and later his wife, Josephine) to White House functions, racial prejudice was daily rearing its ugly head and would soon be enshrined in Jim Crow laws and statutes.¹⁵

Bruce never publicly shared his personal experiences or encounters with racial prejudice, but he probably encountered discrimination from the moment he set foot in the nation's capital as he surely had in Mississippi and elsewhere where assault, murder, and lynching of African Americans was not uncommon. Somewhere along the way the ambitious Bruce, determined to climb the ladder of power, decided not to openly challenge racism as it personally affected him, and he seems to have remained silent in regards to his experience in slavery as well as the anti-black discrimination of his day. More than likely he felt that if whites were uncomfortable or offended his prospects would be severely limited.¹⁶

Blanche Kelso Bruce's older brother Henry, a federal appointee, wrote an autobiographical slave narrative in which he had carefully chosen and crafted his language so as not to upset whites. Achieving

¹⁴ Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 4-5.

¹⁵ "Mrs. Senator Bruce at the President's Reception," *Peoples Advocate*, February 14, 1880; James M. Rosbrow, "Senator From Mississippi," Associated Press article, 1927, in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Untitled article, *Topeka Kansas Herald*, February 27, 1880: Here the article reports that Mrs. Bruce and her sister attended a White House dinner, and went on to jest that none of the "Southern members and their wives ... fainted because these 'inferior Negroes' were present."

¹⁶ In "A Black Senator from Mississippi," Shapiro quotes eight dates in *The Natchez Daily Democrat and Courier* that are "filled with accounts of violence, murder, and lynching" of African Americans in the latter half of 1874 in Mississippi, footnote 25, p. 88.

its purpose, white reviewers of the book applauded Henry Bruce for his “absence of passion usually displayed when former slaves refer to their past bondage.” The *Washington Post* even commended the author for his “pride in the old southern aristocracy.” Although not as successful as his younger brother Blanche, Henry was an aspiring elite who seems to have turned a blind eye to the moral iniquity of slavery to further his own upward mobility in a white world.¹⁷

Having achieved power as a U.S. Senator, however, Blanche Kelso Bruce, broke his silence and challenged racial injustice against African Americans, as well as discrimination faced by Native Americans and Chinese immigrants. With his political aspirations realized he felt secure enough to speak more openly about the injustices that pained and angered him. His new powerful friend and ally, the socially conscious Republican Senator Roscoe Conkling, helped boost Bruce’s self-confidence as well. Taking the junior Senator under his wing, Conkling made sure that Bruce promptly received assignments to both the Committee of Manufacturers and the Committee on Education and Labor.

Challenging claims that Bruce’s Senate (and public service) career was uninspiring,¹⁸ the Mississippi senator boldly spoke out on issues that adversely affected minorities and supported or introduced legislation that was in their interest. He raked southern democrats over the coals for using fraud, intimidation and violence to subdue the black vote and called on the federal government to restore order in the southern states. Bruce supported civil rights and optimistically prophesied an America where a person would not be judged because of color; he opposed the ubiquitous proposals to send blacks to Liberia; he presented impressive statistical evidence on the progress of African Americans since slavery; he supported and eloquently argued for the passage of legislation that would desegregate the army; he called on the federal government to relieve the suffering of impoverished black immigrants who had settled in the West; and in the longest speech of his Senate career, Bruce criticized

¹⁷ Henry C. Bruce, *The New Man: Twenty-nine Years a Slave, Twenty-nine Years a Free Man* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 173-176. Henry did, however, eloquently promote the uplift of African Americans through education so as “to fit them for higher positions;” “Education: Speech of Hon. H.C. Bruce,” *Topeka Kansas Herald*, May 14, 1880.

¹⁸ For example, Howard Rabinowitz maintains that “Bruce did not have an illustrious Senate career” in “Three Reconstruction Leaders: Blanche K. Bruce, Robert Brown Elliott, and Holland Thompson,” Leon Litwack and August Meier, ed., *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 197.

the federal government for its utter exploitation of Native Americans. Predicting their extinction if no changes were made and calling for their assimilation, Bruce requested efforts to preserve Native American culture. Bruce also advocated legislation that would ensure equal pension pay for black Civil War veterans and vociferously refused to support the controversial Chinese Exclusion Bill, comparing the prejudice Asian immigrants faced to that endured by African Americans.¹⁹

Bruce has also been criticized for putting ambition ahead of race. But this does not square with the facts in some cases as Bruce turned down potentially lucrative or prestigious posts on at least two occasions when he felt they conflicted with the debasement of people of African descent. Demonstrating a powerful sense of race consciousness, Bruce refused to serve as consul to Brazil because people there still owned slaves. Although President Garfield pleaded with him to accept the appointment because he believed it would send a powerful message to the Brazilian government, Bruce declined to serve in any diplomatic post where slavery existed. Bruce's decision is all the more interesting since slavery at that time was considered immoral by most Brazilians and was being gradually abolished by legislation, such as the 1871 Law of the Free Womb, which declared that all children born to slaves were free. A man of principle, Bruce nonetheless refused to compromise even with a system of bondage that was discredited and rapidly dying.²⁰

¹⁹ Stephen Middleton, ed., *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 4-24, 26-32; Mann, "Blanche Kelso Bruce," 191-95; "Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi : The First Colored Presiding Officer of the U.S. Senate and the Choice of the Negroes of America for Vice President," *Topeka Kansas Herald*, May 21, 1880; "Slave Boy Who Rose to Senator Recalled as Date of Birth Nears," *New York Times*, February 2, 1937, and Rosbrow, "Senator From Mississippi," in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Howard University. In this latter source, the *New York Times* upon Bruce's death is quoted as saying his career was "one of the most remarkable in all history." Bruce also used his power to dispense patronage in helping African Americans (and whites) obtain federal jobs and posts. See "Senator Bruce's Political Career," C.C. Caldwell to *People's Advocate*, August 16, 1879, in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

²⁰ "Blanche K. Bruce Dead," copy of newspaper article, Film 2157: Professions: Leaders: Prominent Negroes: A-B, Hampton University Newspaper Clipping File, University of Virginia; and Rosbrow, "Senator From Mississippi," in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Howard University; Milton Meltzer, *Slavery: A World History* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1993), 86-87. Bruce's son, Roscoe Conkling Bruce, told an interviewer, "His (Blanche K. Bruce's) sincere, constant, and profound interest in the welfare of the masses of his people was the guiding principle of his whole political career," *New York Times*, February 2, 1937, in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript

After serving as Registrar of the Treasury in the Garfield and Arthur administrations (1881-85), Bruce was asked to remain in that position by Grover Cleveland, the incoming Democratic president. The Democratic Party however was still tainted with slavery in the minds of many African Americans and some feared that the election of the Democrat Cleveland would mean a return to slavery or a form of quasi-slavery. Bruce was sensitive to these anxieties and expressed to President-elect Cleveland that he would be betraying his people if he were to accept an appointment under a Democratic administration. He respectfully declined and waited to be appointed to another federal post, Recorder of Deeds in the District of Columbia, under the Republican administration of Benjamin Harrison four years later.²¹

Bruce even potentially jeopardized his chances for career advancement in the Senate early on by boldly taking an unpopular stand on a controversial and unresolved issue. In his first speech, he criticized his Senate colleagues and his own party for unfairly refusing to seat the second African American elected to that body three years earlier, Pinckney Benton Stewart (P.B.S.) Pinchback of Louisiana, who was still lobbying for his right to serve. The Mississippi Senator even went as far as to denounce President Grant in an executive session—a criticism that got him a prompt summons to the White House.²²

Division, Howard University. For an opposite view regarding Bruce's race consciousness, see letter from Dr. J.S. Henderson to *The Freeman*, January 2, 1897, quoted in Robert Shapiro, "A Black Reconstruction Senator," *The Review of Politics* 44 (January, 1982): 104. Henderson wrote that "Bruce would play the nigger for personal gain. He has never dared to take a decided stand on questions affecting his race when it would endanger his personal advancement."

²¹ "The Negro Who Convinced President Cleveland That He Was Right," *Pittsburgh Times*, October 17, 1910, Film 2157: Professions: Leaders: Prominent Negroes: A-B, Hampton University Newspaper Clipping File, University of Virginia. James Trotter of Boston, an African American leader who had been one of the few black commissioned officers in the Civil War and who had led a successful protest for equal pay for black union soldiers, served as Registrar of the Treasury under President Cleveland. Trotter had urged African Americans not to blindly follow the Republican Party, which was in his view catering to white supremacy and taking the black vote for granted. His son, William Monroe Trotter, would become one of the most ardent activists for black equality in the early twentieth century, helping to set the tone for the modern civil rights movement. See Nicholas Patler, *Jim Crow and the Wilson Administration: Protesting Federal Segregation in the Early Twentieth Century* (Boulder, Co: University Press of Colorado, 2004), 121-22.

²² Urofsky, 126. I recently had the opportunity to read from this paper in regards to the revision of Bruce's public career at the Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce Reception, Farmville, Virginia, March 1, 2006. Those attending included numerous Bruce descendents.

Bruce's wife, Josephine, was also responsive to the needs of African Americans. An early advocate of bringing national recognition to the progress and contributions black Americans had made and were making, she, along with Carter G. Woodson, founder of the groundbreaking *Journal of Negro History*, helped to establish Black History Week, an early predecessor to Black History Month. Josephine also served as an active member and president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), where she worked to "raise the level of life" and "open up opportunities" for all African Americans.²³

As the National Republican Convention of 1880 approached, Bruce's Senate career had catapulted him into national prominence. The lone black Senator, he was essentially the U.S. Senate's representative for African Americans and other minorities throughout the entire nation.

As Bruce took his seat in the Senate in 1875, the reconstructed southern governments that had created the environment for him to make his way to Washington had been weakened or defeated by the Democrats during the state and congressional elections of 1874. Democrats now had control of the United States House of Representatives as well. The black Senator paradoxically rose to power as white supremacy began to take hold of the power base in the South. Bruce was keenly aware of this change, and although the rising Democrats in Mississippi detested him and counted the days until his career was over, he courageously stood up for what he believed in the Senate, including, ironically enough, re-enfranchising the former Confederate leaders.²⁴

Despite this shift in power, three African Americans—Bruce, Congressman John Roy Lynch and state legislator and former secretary

²³ Josephine Bruce and Black History Week, remarks made by Chester L. Hawkins, United States Senate Government Document Librarian, at the Senator Blanche Kelso Bruce Reception, Farmville, Virginia, March 1, 2006; Dulcie M. Straughan, "Lifting As We Climb: An Analysis of the National Association Notes and Its Role in Helping the National Association of Colored Women Achieve Its Goals, 1897-1917," paper submitted to the History Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Convention, August 2002, Miami, Florida.

²⁴ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 221, 228, 232, 235; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 1-22; John Roy Lynch, *The Facts of Reconstruction* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1914), 111-26, and *The Autobiography of John Roy Lynch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 157; James Rosbrow, "Senator From Mississippi," in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

of state James Hill—together exercised considerable influence in the Mississippi GOP, helping to significantly increase black representation in the legislature. This triumvirate had lobbied to get Bruce his seat in the United States Senate. They also enabled one another to chair several state conventions and supported each other as delegates to several national conventions, including the National Republican Convention of 1880.²⁵

Yet it was not so clear at first that Bruce would be a delegate to this convention. For a while it looked as if his support of Secretary of the Treasury John Sherman for the Republican nomination would be overshadowed by the popularity of the Ulysses S. Grant forces in Mississippi. If they prevailed, a potential Sherman delegate such as Bruce would stay at home. After a bitter fight in the state GOP, it became apparent that Republicans were divided between Grant and Sherman and that a compromise was necessary. Thus, a delegation was elected that was evenly divided between Grant and Sherman supporters. Bruce and James Hill, the latter also a Sherman supporter, were among those delegates elected to go to Chicago.²⁶

America's third largest city was electric as people began swarming into town more than a week before the official start of the convention on June 2. Most of the political leaders and the 756 delegates arriving in Chicago had to make their way through the congestion of horses, wagons, and carriages clogging the streets, and the thousands of people on the sidewalks. Here for the first time every state was represented, and it was estimated that more than 50,000 people had come to Chicago for the convention. The atmosphere was so frenzied that one newspaper printed the witty headline "Ohio's governor has disappeared in the confusion of Chicago."²⁷

Chicago had first hosted the Republican nominating convention in 1860 when Abraham Lincoln was chosen to head the ticket. Before that time, all conventions had been held in the East, but party managers

²⁵ Foner, 228; Lynch, *Reconstruction*, 192-93, and *Autobiography*, 210-11; James Hill to Bruce, January 16, 1880, and State of Mississippi delegate listing, May 5, 1880, Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

²⁶ Hill to Bruce, January 16, 1880, P.B.S. Pinchback to Bruce, May 12, 1880, and "State of Mississippi," May 5, 1880, Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

²⁷ *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 5, 1880; Herbert J. Clancy, *The Presidential Election of 1880* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1958) 82; Shields-West, 108; Ackerman, 79.

broke with tradition and selected the fast-growing prairie metropolis from which the relatively unknown Lincoln would be ultimately propelled into national martyrdom. Thus, for Republicans of all stripes the convention of 1880 had a symbolic as well as sentimental significance. Spectators were immediately aware of this when they entered the new Interstate Exposition Building, that housed the convention and where on the rear wall staring down on them was a giant portrait of Lincoln surrounded by his words, "And that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."²⁸

Some newspapers such as the *Atlanta Daily Constitution* and *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* predicted a quick victory for Lincoln's general on the first ballot, the former calling Grant's nomination a "certainty." Rumors had been circulating for weeks that James G. Blaine was popular enough to keep the former president from getting the 379 votes required for the nomination. Making this more complex, John Sherman was gaining support daily and was siphoning votes away from both of the front-runners. The fight in Mississippi between the Grant and Sherman factions, not to mention the division in other states over Grant, Blaine, and Sherman, foreshadowed what took place on the national stage during the convention. Indeed, many believed a deadlock imminent, and if that happened it would mean a convention full of tension and drama—a dream for the throng of newspapermen gathered in the city.²⁹

Chicago hotels were packed to capacity, where political teams and delegates set up, including the distinguished Palmer House where Blanche Kelso Bruce and other African American delegates stayed and brainstormed during the convention. With 800 plush rooms and luxurious convention space, the Palmer House could accommodate more than 8,000 people. While many Chicago hotels refused to serve African Americans, black delegates were "received hospitably" at the upscale Palmer House, and here they shared lodging and office space, not to mention dining facilities, with white delegates—"social equality on a

²⁸ Allan Nevins, *The Nomination of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1960), 1-5; Untitled article, *New York Evening Post*, June 2, 1880.

²⁹ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 31, 1880, *Chicago Herald*, May 31, 1880, and *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 1, 1880 and June 5, 1880. Unlike the often-heated conventions of the past that dealt with the issues and personalities of the day, writer and reporter Bob Shiefer recently told an audience that the impersonal political conventions today "are infomercials and don't get down to political business," Bob Shiefer, *This Just In: What I Couldn't Tell You on TV*, C-Span Network, C-Span Book TV, April 16, 2005.

big scale,” in the words of one southern black delegate. This integrated environment included, among others, the convention’s eventual nominee for president, James A. Garfield, whose Ohio delegation was headquartered in an office there—integrated accommodations, incidentally, that drew the bitter consternation of southern newspapers.³⁰

The Palmer House was also the nerve center to another organization that piqued the curiosity of Chicagoans. The National Women’s Suffrage Association (NWSA), led by Susan B. Anthony, was assembled at the hotel to strategize how to get a plank favoring women’s suffrage in the Republican platform. These crusaders from “every state in the union” fervently pitched their cause to powerbrokers in the lobbies of the Palmer House and other hotels. Although the Republican Party never gave the NWSA its plank, the convention did curry their favor by inviting several members to appear on the main platform during the second day of events.³¹

Once the convention proceedings officially began on June 2, curious spectators hovered daily around the city’s hotels and the Interstate Exposition Building, eager to catch a glimpse of some of the larger-than-life personalities—Civil War hero and former president Ulysses S. Grant; the colorful six-foot three-inch New York Senator Roscoe Conkling who was famously reported to walk with a “turkey strut,” and Prince Leopold, Queen Victoria’s youngest son, who was in town with his entourage and reported to be interested in observing the convention proceedings. In addition to the spectators and numerous people making their way to the convention hall galleries, the streets were teeming with police, firemen, vendors, and eager scalpers hocking tickets to the Republican convention for as much as \$25 apiece.³²

³⁰ Ackerman, 28-29; “The Politicians and Chicago,” *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 8, 1880; “Colored Delegates Arriving,” *New York Tribune*, May 28, 1880; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 31, 1880; untitled article, *Charleston (South Carolina) News and Courier*, June 1, 1880; “Visiting the Colored Delegations,” *Boston Daily Globe*, June 7, 1880; “A Colored Delegate’s Experience,” *Athens (Georgia) Blade*, reprinted in *People’s Advocate* (DC), June 5, 1880; “A Veteran Politician’s Glance Over the Field,” *Philadelphia Times*, reprinted in *Charleston News and Courier*, June 4, 1880.

³¹ “They want a Plank in the Chicago Platform,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 31, 1880; “Women’s Suffrage at Chicago,” *New York Evening Post*, May 31, 1880; and “The Convention,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 4, 1880.

³² Ackerman, *Dark House*, 79.

But a phenomenon that captured the attention of many newspapers and onlookers, including Prince Leopold, was the presence of numerous African American delegates and party men in the city. With Chicago's black population at a mere one percent in 1880, natives and out-of-towners alike gawked daily at the unusual site of busy and impeccably dressed black political leaders walking down the sidewalks, going in and out of buildings, and congregating in lobbies. Some of the more curious reporters found them noteworthy as novelties and commented or mocked endlessly on their appearance and attire, while others, offended by African Americans with status, assured their readers that the black delegates, far from thinking on their own, were being "managed" or manipulated. But other newspapers took them seriously. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, although suspicious and paternalistic, nevertheless announced that "[o]ur colored brethren ... have business to transact. They are no longer the bulldozed and ostracized."³³

The truth of the matter was that the black delegates in Chicago took their job of selecting who they believed would be the next president and vice president of the United States seriously. Pawns of none, they met the white delegates and candidates as well as each other, held strategy sessions, vociferously promoted their views and opinions in meetings and on the convention hall floor, and resisted pressure from white power brokers to switch allegiances. General Grant, the convention favorite, for example, made a personal visit to Bruce one night at the Palmer House and tried to enlist his support as the two sipped whiskey, but the black delegate remained committed to John Sherman.³⁴

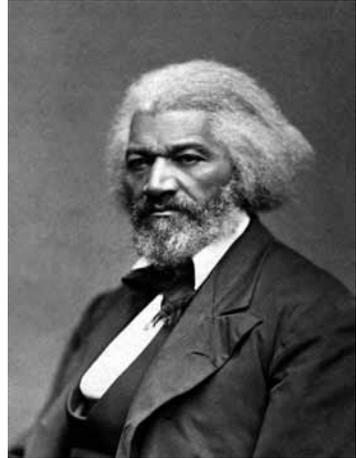
Although many African American delegates were leaders in their respective states and among their delegations—including Jeremiah Haralson of Alabama and Jefferson Long of Georgia, not to mention the illustrious Frederick Douglass who was in attendance at the convention

³³ Harold F. Gosnell, *Negro Politicians: The Rise of Negro Politics in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 14; "Colored Delegates en Route," *Detroit Free Press*, reprinted in *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 1, 1880; "The Grant Men Have a Bombshell," *Boston Daily Globe*, June 7, 1880; "The Chief Objects of Interest in Chicago," *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1880; untitled article, *Charleston News and Courier*, June 3, 1880.

³⁴ Ackerman, 81. "Visiting the Colored Delegations," *Boston Daily Globe*, June 7, 1880; "Colored Delegates Arriving," *New York Tribune*, May 28, 1880; "The Chief Objects," *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1880; "The Georgia Puzzle at Chicago," *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 1, 1880; (Louisville, Kentucky) *Bulletin*, February (indecipherable), 1880: Here the paper urges the nomination of Bruce, but in doing so calls it an empty honor.

as an advisor—the acknowledged black leader in Chicago of national note was Blanche Kelso Bruce. Sometime during or before the official proceedings he was named one of the convention’s vice presidents. Many black delegates believed optimistically that Bruce, regardless of his color, was politically viable and could be the next vice president of the United States—with some going so far as to call it “a sign of the times”—and set themselves to the task of promoting him as their choice for the number two spot on the national ticket. However other, more pessimistic supporters believed Bruce stood no chance at all but still desired he get the honorary mention by having his name officially proposed.³⁵

It appears that the campaign for Bruce began weeks before the National Republican Convention was to meet in Chicago. The *New York Tribune* reported on May 15 that an office had been opened in Washington, D.C., to explore the possibility of selecting a “colored Republican for a place on the presidential ticket.” The two men who opened the office were



Frederick Douglass

J. Milton Turner and W.H. Bell. The former, one of the first African American federal appointees, had served as Minister to Liberia (1871-78) under both the Grant and Hayes administrations and the latter was a politician from Missouri.³⁶

The *New York Tribune* and the *Washington Post* also reported that a recent meeting had been held at the Washington office to brainstorm the idea, and that among those attending were Frederick Douglass and Senator Bruce. If true, this underscores the fact that not only did African American delegates in Chicago believe that a black man could be on the Republican presidential ticket, but three of the most recognized black

³⁵ “Visiting the Colored Delegations,” *Boston Daily Globe*, June 7, 1880; “Colored Delegates Arriving,” *New York Tribune*, May 28, 1880; “The Chief Objects,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1880; “The Georgia Puzzle at Chicago,” *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 1, 1880; “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi: The Man for the Second Place of the Ticket,” *Topeka Kansas Herald*, May 28, 1880. This paper, which was in opposition to Bruce at one point, did an about face and, amazingly, predicted that Bruce would receive the nomination; *Official Proceedings*, 418.

³⁶ “A Colored Vice-President,” *New York Tribune*, May 15, 1880.

leaders in America—Douglass, Bruce, and Turner—considered the possibility as well. Moreover, they may have given this movement impetus.³⁷

With this in mind, Douglass did in fact issue an ardent public endorsement of Bruce for vice president shortly before the convention, saying,

Senator Bruce's nomination is eminently fit to be made. He has intelligence, character and experience ... and there is no more impropriety in naming him for the exalted position in question than there would be in naming for the same any other republican member of the United States Senate. His nomination and election would do more to honor and elevate the colored people of the country and remove race prejudice than any civil rights bill that statesmen can devise or Congress can enact.³⁸

Yet as early as February, black newspapers such as the *Washington Argus* and Louisville, Kentucky *Bulletin* were supporting Bruce for vice president. In April the *Kansas Herald*, although not in favor of Senator Bruce at first, changed its mind after his brother Henry Bruce made a visit to the newspaper office canvassing for Blanche on what appears to have been part of a larger tour to garner support. Soon thereafter the *Herald* began running a large ad in each edition that read "Our Ticket For President, James G. Blaine of Maine; For Vice-President, B. K. Bruce of Mississippi."³⁹

J. Milton Turner seems to have strategically promoted Bruce in the national press as well, using his status as a former government diplomat to have Bruce's name mentioned in papers such as the *Washington Post*. Here Turner gave the newspaper a letter he had received from a William P. Jones, reported to be a "prominent" citizen of Cincinnati. The letter was printed in its entirety in the *Post*, and its wording was such that it appears that Turner and Jones probably collaborated with full intention of getting it into the news. The letter eloquently called on "every colored voter" and all Republicans to support Bruce, and informed readers that

³⁷ *Ibid*; "A Question of Race," *Washington Post*, May 19, 1880.

³⁸ Untitled news clipping, Charleston (South Carolina) *News and Courier*, May 22, 1880; and "Frederick Douglass for Senator Bruce," Staunton (Virginia) *Spectator*, June 1, 1880.

³⁹ "Senator Bruce," *Washington Argus* reprint in *Topeka Kansas Herald*, February 20, 1880, and April 2, 1880; "Our Ticket," April 23, 1880, and "Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi," *Topeka Kansas Herald*, May 21, 1880.

Bruce for vice president clubs were being formed throughout Ohio.⁴⁰ About a week later another article appeared in the *Post* reporting on an address made by “colored citizens of Washington” to African Americans all over the country, and the delegates going to Chicago, explaining why Bruce would be the best choice for vice president.⁴¹

Many black citizens were excited about the prospect of a Bruce nomination and crowded their local tax collectors’ offices at the last minute to pay their poll taxes to vote in northern states and even in some southern states, particularly in urban areas, such as in Richmond, Virginia, and Atlanta, Georgia. And a month or so before the National Republican Convention met in Chicago, African American delegates and party leaders were dynamically participating in their own Republican state conventions, during which many “favorably mentioned” or “formally proposed” the name of Senator Bruce for nomination as vice president.⁴²

One of these leaders, P.B.S. Pinchback, the former black governor of Louisiana and the target of a controversial smear campaign which prevented him from taking his elected seat in the United States Senate in 1874, appears to have helped lead and organize the campaign for placing Bruce’s name before the convention as a vice presidential nominee. Writing to Bruce in early March—two months before the aforementioned *New York Tribune* article—he told the Senator, “[w]e are starting a boom for you for Vice President.” A week or so before the convention African American delegates and party leaders answered Pinchback’s public call in his newspaper and reprinted in black newspapers across the nation to arrive in Chicago “a few days prior” to the start of the convention, quite possibly to discuss Bruce’s candidacy.⁴³

But all of this raises the question: did Bruce himself want to be considered for the number two spot on the Republican ticket in 1880? Although

⁴⁰ “Bruce’s Candidacy: The Black Republican Element Moving on Chicago,” *Washington Post*, May 18, 1880.

⁴¹ Untitled article, *Washington Post*, May 26, 1880.

⁴² Untitled article, (Richmond, Virginia) *Daily Dispatch*, May 26, 1880; “Prejudice vs. Bruce,” *People’s Advocate*, May 29, 1880.

⁴³ Pinchback to Bruce, March 5, 1880, Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Howard University; Pinchback call, *People’s Advocate* (DC), April 3, 1880. This is interesting since making the trip to Chicago for many delegates, black and white, was an out-of-pocket expense, and for black delegates who were less likely to have the resources of their white peers, attending the convention could be a financial burden, particularly if the stay was extended as Pinchback asked them to do.



Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback

Pinchback would offer a curious denial shortly after the convention, telling a reporter “there was never the slightest intention” of placing Bruce on the ticket and that he “neither sought nor desired the nomination,” and despite the fact that it appears Bruce did not publicly accept or endorse his own candidacy, neither did he interfere with or attempt to stifle the national movement to promote him for the vice presidency. He made no moves to prevent close friends and others, including the black press, from publicly supporting

him and working on his behalf, nor did he respond as his name as a candidate for the vice presidency was splashed throughout the white press. Moreover, as the above *New York Tribune* article shows, the black leader may have been directly involved with strategizing his candidacy. Bruce’s public silence was all too common for national contenders during this time, who believed it was good strategy not to seem too eager and to let others do the footwork while staying in the background to gauge public opinion. James A. Garfield epitomized such a blithe attitude by appearing not just indifferent but opposed to his own nomination until the very last minute.⁴⁴

Hanes Walton, Jr., in his book *Black Republicans: The Politics of the Black and Tans* offers perhaps the only partial tally made of the number of black delegates at the Chicago convention in 1880. Walton lists twenty-one black delegates from eight southern states.⁴⁵ Although a precise number is hard to nail down, it appears there were many more African American delegates representing more states than are on this list as well as several black alternate delegates, including some from

⁴⁴ St. Claire, 161.

⁴⁵ Hanes Walton, Jr., *Black Republicans: The Politics of the Black and Tans* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), 171.

the North. Several newspapers from the time mentioned black delegates from Georgia, Louisiana, Kansas, and Washington, D.C., among others, whose names and states are not noted by Walton.⁴⁶

With these and other delegates, the Chicago convention also brought to town many black political leaders and advisors who, in addition to their formal duties, were part of the unofficial exploratory committee considering Bruce for the vice presidential spot, including, as mentioned, Frederick Douglass. There seems to be no recorded proceedings of these strategy sessions however, other than that African Americans, including Bruce, were engaged in “frequent consultations” to discuss the vice presidency. It seems organizers maintained a guarded posture in regard to the purpose of these meetings, probably due to the fact that the idea of a Bruce candidacy was a highly sensitive topic with the white press, particularly in the South, but also with some white newspapers in the North and West.⁴⁷

Unable to resist the rumor of a Bruce candidacy, many white Democratic newspapers taunted the Republican Party in their columns. “Here is an opportunity for the Republicans to show how true and loyal they are to the glorious doctrine of equality,” trumpeted the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, “Let the ticket be GRANT and BRUCE.” The *Montgomery Daily Advertiser* did not take the rumors as lightly. After claiming that the Republican Party only gives “the darky ... unimportant positions,” the newspaper reassured its readers that the party “could not afford such a waste” by placing “Bruce or any ‘colored statesman’ on the presidential ticket.”⁴⁸

Even without the details regarding the secretive Bruce strategy sessions, there was no hiding the public display of emotion his supporters felt, reported by the papers, when they “serenaded” him at the Palmer House Hotel. At the end of the opening day of the convention on June 2, African American delegates and others, energized by the prospect of a Bruce candidacy, crowded the rotunda of the hotel and held a vice

⁴⁶ *Topeka Kansas Herald*, March 5, 1880. This writer estimates that the number of African American delegates, party leaders, advisors, speakers, lobbyists, etc. in Chicago in 1880 was probably well over fifty. This does not include the numerous African Americans who were present in the gallery during the convention proceedings.

⁴⁷ Untitled article, Charleston (South Carolina) *News and Courier*, June 2, 1880.

⁴⁸ “Bruce,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 31, 1880; untitled, June 4, 1880; “A Vice,” *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, June 6, 1880. Other newspapers include the *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 4, and June 10, 1880.

presidential pep rally for their man who, to the cheers and applause of his supporters, made an appearance and a brief speech.⁴⁹

While there is no accessible account of Bruce's remarks, newspapers reported that he was followed by black leader George Washington Williams who made an "eloquent" speech in the rotunda in honor of the black Senator. This speech seems to be lost to posterity as well; however, it is not without some significance that Williams was speaking to this assemblage of Bruce supporters, if for nothing else than the fact that Bruce's life was uniquely fascinating for an African American man in the latter nineteenth century.

A restless renaissance man, in 1880 Williams was serving as the first black member of the Ohio state legislature. Living in many places throughout his short life, he was a soldier, politician, minister, writer, pioneering historian, and human rights activist. The brilliant Williams reinvented (and by some accounts misrepresented) himself many times, which enabled him to move with relative ease through an often hostile or at best ambivalent white world, and in some cases even within the corridors of national and international power.⁵⁰

The most remarkable thing Williams did, however, would not happen until ten years after the Chicago convention of 1880, a little more than a year before his premature death. Posing as a delegate to the Anti-Slavery Conference in Brussels in 1889, Williams met with King Leopold II to seek funding for a group of black Americans to help settle and work the Belgian-controlled Congo. Deciding to go it alone, Williams made a trip to Africa and was sickened by the horrific exploitation and mistreatment the Congolese endured at the hands of the white Belgians and their representatives. He soon thereafter produced a then-milestone in human rights documents in his investigative open indictment of Leopold's colonial regime, later writing to Secretary of State James G. Blaine that the Belgian king was guilty of "crimes against humanity"—a phrase that would not come into the vernacular until the appalling genocidal and mass murder campaigns of the twentieth century.⁵¹

⁴⁹ "Noon Telegrams," *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, June 3, 1880; and "The Presidential Tail: The Colored Brother Asserts His Claim," *Atlanta Daily Constitution*, June 3, 1880.

⁵⁰ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 101-06.

⁵¹ Hochschild, 105-14.

Back in June 1880, however, the passionate Williams was in Chicago as either a Republican delegate or advisor, and without doubt a stalwart Bruce supporter and representative. He was also in town to support fellow Ohioan John Sherman for the presidential nomination—a potential candidacy that persuaded many African Americans, including Bruce, early on in 1880 to leave the Grant camp and instead give their support to the Treasury Secretary. While serving in Congress Sherman had supported the Fifteenth Amendment enfranchising black Americans. Williams and other African Americans personally met with Sherman, as well as Grant and Blaine in Chicago and participated in the various meetings with delegates and leaders, both in private sessions and on the floor at the Interstate Exposition Building during some of the convention proceedings.

Although an in-depth analysis of the 1880 National Republican Convention is beyond the scope of this article—indeed there are several detailed accounts that take the reader from the first to the last day of events⁵²—there were three key moments (one of which was extraordinary) before and during the convention proceedings that were crucial in helping to pave the way for Bruce’s official convention support and consideration.

The first had to do with what was then known as the unit rule. This rule, used at past Republican conventions, required every member of a state delegation to vote as a block for the candidate who the majority of the delegation supported. If more than half of a state delegation supported Grant, for example, then the dissenters would be required to cast their vote for the general. In 1880, the Grant forces were determined to use the unit rule to manipulate support to their advantage, knowing full well that without the enforcement of this rule Grant would fall short of the 379 votes necessary for nomination.⁵³

In meetings of the National Republican Committee in Chicago days before the convention it became quickly apparent that there was serious opposition to the unit rule from the anti-Grant men who made up the majority. When the committee chairman and Grant supporter Don Cameron of Pennsylvania openly refused to consider a vote on the unit rule, it set off a day-long clash between the Grant supporters and those

⁵² *Official Proceedings*; Ackerman; Clancy.

⁵³ Clancy, 83-85; Hoar, II, 389-393; “The Chicago Convention,” *Harper’s Weekly*, June 5, 1880, and “The Unit Rule,” *Harper’s Weekly*, June 19, 1880.

opposed to his nomination, finally forcing a vote that night whereby the unit rule was voted down. This action officially freed delegates to vote for (and seriously consider voting for) Bruce for vice president. Otherwise they would have been forced to cast their votes for Chester Arthur.⁵⁴

The next important event to take place was the election of Senator George Frisbie Hoar of Massachusetts as presiding chairman of the convention proceedings. In the midst of the unit rule wrangling, the National Committee decided to nominate a chairman who was perceived to be neutral in the debate, and that honor fell to Senator Hoar. This essentially gave him control of all formalities during the entire convention in Chicago.⁵⁵



Massachusetts Senator George Frisbie Hoar

together on issues to uplift minorities, including fighting the infamous Chinese Exclusion Bill.⁵⁶

This brings us to the last and most remarkable unanticipated episode which gave Bruce mass visibility during the convention proceedings—a snap yet strategic decision made by Hoar that fired the imaginations of Bruce supporters and potential supporters. As the formalities rolled on during the proceedings of Friday, June 4, Prince Leopold of England, on a whirlwind tour of the United States and Canada, was brought to

An early member of the Free Soil Party and one of the organizers of the Republican Party in Massachusetts, Senator Hoar enjoyed a remarkable career as a scholar, human rights activist, and politician. With his wired spectacles, the New Englander was bookish in appearance and could give off a dignified air at times, but he seemed anything but pretentious as he fervently argued for the rights of minorities from the Senate floor. Senator Hoar was a close friend and colleague of Senator Bruce, and the two men shared some of the same convictions and often worked together

⁵⁴ Ibid; “The Republican National Convention,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, June 2, 1880.

⁵⁵ Ibid; Hoar, vol. 1, 392-93.

⁵⁶ Hoar, vol. 2, 59-60.

the platform and introduced to Senator Hoar. The American political process had always intrigued Leopold and being surrounded that day by the music, color, and drama, indeed the reported “uproar” of the convention, he found his curiosity piqued even more. An honored and surprised Hoar later wrote of the remarkable decision he made immediately after meeting Leopold, “Wishing to converse with the Prince, I called Mr. Bruce to the Chair.” The Senator went on to write that the reason he chose Bruce in such an unprecedented move to temporarily chair a national convention was to “confer an honor upon a worthy colored man in the presence of a representative of this Royal House.”⁵⁷

But Senator Hoar would not have made such a bold move if he did not think it would impress the Prince. With that said, why did he believe that Leopold would be impressed (rather than shocked) by the seating of a black man, with all the conferment of power that such a move symbolized, as chairman of an American political convention from where in all likelihood the next president of the United States would emerge?

There is no clear answer here. However, one possibility may be surmised by taking a brief look at Prince Leopold himself. Queen Victoria’s youngest son had suffered dreadfully throughout his childhood and young adult life from hemophilia. It was not unusual for him to be in such agonizing pain, which could stretch into weeks, that he would often fall into a deep depression and wish he were dead. “I find no pleasure in living, but only pain,” wrote a miserable Leopold to a friend. Although he was unable to participate in the physical activities of other boys his age, Leopold was a voracious reader and developed a capacity for languages and musical instruments and a keen interest in people that stayed with him until his premature death at age thirty-one.⁵⁸

Considered the most intelligent and inquisitive member of the Royal family, the frail Leopold fled the Royal Palace, his prison in many respects, and ran off to Oxford, where he made deep and abiding friendships, including one with the controversial professor and socialist John Ruskin. An eloquent spokesman for the poor and marginalized,

⁵⁷ Hoar, vol. 2, 61-62; St. Clair, 159; “Prince Leopold,” *Harper’s Weekly*, June 5, 1880; Charlotte Zeepvat, *Prince Leopold: The Untold Story of Queen Victoria’s Youngest Son* (England: Sutton Publishing, 1998); Untitled article extract, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, June 5, 1880. “Lively Scenes in the Chicago Convention,” *The (Lynchburg) Virginian*, June 8, 1880.

⁵⁸ Zeepvat, Giles St. Aubyn, *Queen Victoria: A Portrait* (Great Britain: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991) 284, 483.

Ruskin denounced the selfish greed of English society and later served as a powerful inspiration for Mahatma Gandhi. Leopold's disability and Ruskin's influence led him to sympathize with others who were less fortunate, and he personally threw himself into causes to help the disabled. He also became an early pioneering advocate for controlling air and water pollution (Ruskin's influence is seen here as well) as mass industrialization swept Europe.⁵⁹

The astute Senator Hoar was probably well informed in regards to the prince's disease, as well as his abiding interests and unusual sympathies, which had been reported by U.S. newspapers. The worldly Leopold likewise had probably studied American political history or at least knew about the transformation that was taking place in regard to African Americans, who just a decade and a half earlier had been slaves but were now participants in the political process. Moreover, he probably identified with their handicap and approved of their rise in a government that once held them down.⁶⁰

In any event, Bruce was now temporarily chairing the convention—seated in a position that in many respects represented white power—and African Americans at the convention, and later all over the country, were thrilled. This gave Bruce mass visibility and energized his supporters, and his prospects as a serious candidate for the vice presidency now seemed even more credible. Sometime thereafter, Frederick Douglass presented to Senator Hoar a letter signed by “prominent colored men of the country” thanking him for inviting Bruce to serve in the presiding role at the convention.⁶¹

This was not the first time Senator Hoar had singled out Bruce for a distinction. During Senate proceedings in Washington, the Massachusetts senator, serving as chairman in the absence of Vice President William A. Wheeler, “spied Mr. Bruce in his seat” and invited the Mississippi Senator to take his place as the temporary presiding officer.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid; Terri L. Kelly, *Towards an Understanding of the Transformational Nature of Satyagraha* (unpublished graduate paper, Department of Conflict Resolution, Portland State University, 2000): Here the author quotes Gandhi as saying that Ruskin's *Unto the Last* “marked the turning point in my life.”

⁶⁰ “Prince Leopold,” *Harper's Weekly*, June 5, 1880; “The Prince is physically the weakest and mentally the strongest of the Royal family,” says the article. This piece goes on to say that his “illnesses” have enabled him to develop his intellect.

⁶¹ Hoar, II, 62.

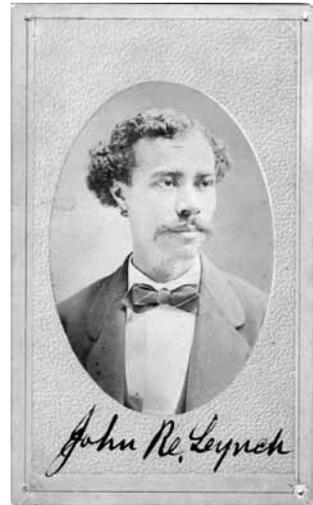
⁶² Hoar, II, 61; “Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi,” *Topeka Kansas Herald*, May 21, 1880; James M. Rosbrow, “Senator From Mississippi,” Associated Press article, 1927, in Blanche

In Chicago, Bruce held the gavel for only a short time during which several prospective spokesmen clamored for the floor. Looking around, Bruce called James A. Garfield of Ohio to present the “Report on the Committee on Rules” and other various reports that had to do with convention formalities. This action may have been a pivotal moment at the convention since it introduced the relatively unknown Garfield and his oratorical abilities to those who would eventually decide in his favor.⁶³

Four more heated days of votes and speeches followed with none of the convention elites—Grant, Blaine, or Sherman—getting the majority vote necessary for the nomination. Finally, on the thirty-sixth ballot, a draft candidate who was in Chicago as a delegate, James A. Garfield, received 399 votes, making him the Republican nominee for the presidency of the United States in 1880.⁶⁴

Following Garfield’s nomination, the convention took a recess and came back later that evening to vote for vice president. Unlike national political conventions today, delegates in 1880 voted separately for president and vice president.⁶⁵ Shortly after the evening proceedings began, it became apparent that Chester A. Arthur of New York was gaining momentum for the nomination. Delegate chairmen from state after state rose to propose his name and give a brief speech.

When it was Mississippi’s turn, Congressman John Roy Lynch, who six years earlier had been ejected from a restaurant in Holly Springs, Mississippi, because of his color, stood up and gave a remarkable and revealing speech before finally conceding his state to Arthur. Lynch had



Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Howard University.

⁶³ *Convention Proceedings*, 418-22. “A Colored Man in the Chair,” *Charleston News and Courier*, June 5, 1880; Urofsky, 138, footnote 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 628-32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 632. “Evening Recess,” (Richmond) *Daily Dispatch*, June 8, 1880. While today it is theoretically possible for a delegate to vote independently, most delegates accept their presidential nominee’s hand-picked choice to be on the ticket. Furthermore, today the nominees for president and vice president are already established before the official nominating process takes place.

been one of the most effective black state power brokers in the South during Reconstruction. Emancipated in his later teens after the Civil War, Lynch went on to become a state legislator and three term-congressman from Mississippi, as well as a delegate to five national conventions. In 1884, following in Bruce's footsteps, Lynch became the second African American to temporarily preside as chairman of the convention, and later he became a federal appointee and a commissioned officer in the Spanish American War.⁶⁶

Lynch was disheartened as he began his speech to Chairman Hoar with the convention delegates and spectators looking on. "I desire to say, sir,

that when we came to the [C]onvention it was the intention of the delegates from Mississippi and a number of other [S]outhern [S]tates, as well as the [N]orthern States, to present, for the consideration of the [C]onvention, the name of Mississippi's distinguished son and able Senator, B. K. Bruce. Recognizing the fact, as we do, that hearty harmony and hearty unity are essential to success, instead of asking this [C]onvention to do themselves honor in placing this gentleman upon the ticket, it is the wish of that gentleman and his friends that we heartily, cheerfully, and willingly concur in all that has been said in behalf of New York's choice (Chester A. Arthur) ..."

As Lynch's speech reveals, Bruce had eager support from various delegations, but in the end he and "his friends" convinced most of his supporters not to vote for him in the name of party unity. Many African Americans were disappointed by this decision and lamented the fact that their candidate had made the decision to withdraw.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, when the votes were tallied, Bruce still received eight votes from delegates who had interrupted Arthur's momentum—four from Louisiana, two from Indiana, and one each from Michigan and Wisconsin. The latter three states were considered swing states in the North, with dynamic and politically active black populaces. Bruce also managed to finish ahead of four white men who received delegate votes as potential long shots for the number two spot, including Thomas Settle of Florida, whose name was also proposed and seconded as a presidential

⁶⁶ Shapiro, footnote 25, p. 88. "Lynch, John Roy, 1847-1939," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* (<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=L000533>).

⁶⁷ *Convention Proceedings*, 639-40; "Senator Bruce," *Topeka Kansas Herald*, June 11, 1880.

hopeful. Another one of these four, who received half as many votes as Bruce, was James Lusk Alcorn, the Mississippi senior senator who had broken with tradition by refusing to escort Senator-elect Bruce to the swearing in ceremony that day on the Senate floor in 1875.⁶⁸

With his Senate career over and the convention of 1880 behind him, for the next twenty years Blanche Kelso Bruce was busy as he held two federal appointments (but was recruited for more): Recorder of Deeds in Washington, D.C., and two terms as Registrar of the Treasury, altogether spanning four republican presidencies—James A. Garfield, Chester Arthur, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley. His name would again be proposed for vice president for the Republican, Greenback, and Prohibitionist parties. Bruce regularly campaigned on behalf of political candidates, served on the school board for the District of Columbia, received an honorary doctorate from Howard University (all the more impressive considering Bruce did not hold even an undergraduate degree) and, as a speaker in demand, lectured throughout the country seeking educational and economic opportunities for African Americans—reportedly giving one hundred speeches in one winter alone at the impressive fee of \$100 per lecture.⁶⁹

There is no mention in Bruce's personal correspondence or newspaper accounts of how he viewed his unusual success and remarkable life in the latter nineteenth century—with one exception. While the former slave interacted and worked with some of the most powerful people in America, and notwithstanding his recognition nationally and internationally (he traveled extensively throughout Europe in 1878), the only time the humble Bruce publicly admitted he was proud of one of his accomplishments was shortly after he became Registrar of the Treasury in 1881. Not long after being sworn in, with an invited press looking on, Bruce was elated when he displayed the first U.S. currency bearing his signature for inspection by his staff: "Who would have thought this

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 634-35, 639-40, 644. Shapiro, 94.

⁶⁹ "Colored Brother," *New York Times* article, February 29, 1887; James M. Rosbrow, "Senator From Mississippi," Associated Press article, 1927, and "Blanche K. Bruce Led One of the Most Remarkable Careers in American History," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 15, 1945, in Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Manuscript Division, Howard University; "Blanche K. Bruce Dead," copy of newspaper article, Film 2157: Professions: Leaders: Prominent Negroes: A-B, Hampton University Newspaper Clipping File, University of Virginia.

spectacle a score of years ago! This is an incident of interest worthy of a place upon the bright pages of the history of a public man's life."⁷⁰

These remarks were not made in regard to his amazing career up to that point, or in having his name proposed for the vice presidency of the most powerful political party in the country, but only when the name of B.K. Bruce—a black man and former slave—officially appeared on what he knew to be the symbol of the true uncontested power and influence in American life, and one that had been at the root of slavery, the almighty dollar.

Finally, Bruce's genteel manners, intelligence, and friendly disposition enabled him to move with relative ease in white power circles during his life. He spoke out against racial injustice and advocated protections and opportunities for minorities, but he did so with eloquence and a charismatic presence that gained the respect of many, and perhaps the reluctant tolerance of others. Bruce was a large landowner in Bolivar County, Mississippi, which in those days reinforced political power. By 1874 he had amassed some of the most prime real estate in the county, including a plantation with 640 acres.⁷¹ It must be pointed out as well that Bruce's olive complexion and chiseled Anglo Saxon features, not to mention his large frame, enabled him to move with less resistance in a white world than other black leaders with more apparent African features and darker skin. Here is how one white newspaper favorably described the black Senator in comparison with his peers: "The colored members of Congress did not impress one as particularly good specimens of the race, except Bruce ... who is a very fine looking mulatto, tall, stout and handsome." In short, he looked more Caucasian than most of his black colleagues, and that was more or less an asset for African Americans aspiring to political leadership on the local, state, and national levels in late nineteenth century America.⁷²

Bruce also fits in with the dozens of black congressmen, state, and local leaders during Reconstruction who eloquently argued—often from

⁷⁰ "Senator Bruce and Grant: Mississippi Colored Statesman Abroad," *New York Times*, December 7, 1878; St. Claire, 176; *The People's Advocate*, June 18, 1881.

⁷¹ Shapiro, 86-87.

⁷² "Bruce, the Colored Senator," *The Republican*, July 6, 1978, Blanche Kelso Bruce Papers, Howard University. Author's unpublished paper, *The Rise of the Mulatto Elite in America, 1860-1900* (graduate seminar in African American history, Harvard University, Spring 1996).

the floors of the white-dominated national and state legislatures—for education, economic opportunities, and political and civil rights for all Americans. Many of these accomplished leaders, articulating visions of racial equality years ahead of their time, included Robert Brown Elliot, Alonzo Ransier, and Robert Smalls⁷³ of South Carolina, Henry Turner and Jefferson Long of Georgia, John Mercer Langston of Virginia, and James O'Hara and John Henry White from North Carolina.

When White's term expired in 1901, he would be the last African American to serve in Congress for twenty-eight years. And there would be no significant black political representation in the United States for more than half a century. Facing almost universal disfranchisement, ubiquitous Jim Crow laws, violence at the hands of white mobs, and with virtually no opportunity for the realization of political aspirations, African Americans withdrew from official political life. In this increasingly hostile environment, blacks debated and experimented with alternative strategies for racial uplift, including economic upward mobility, group protest, and grassroots political agitation.

The amazing accomplishments and efforts of Blanche K. Bruce and the black Reconstruction leaders also receded from memory, with much help from the racist school of historiography, extremely popular in the first part of the twentieth century, that rewrote history to portray these black leaders as pawns in the hands of whites, corrupt, ignorant, and a menace to democratic rule in the South. The racist revision of Reconstruction and its myth of corrupt black rule was so influential that school textbooks and historians largely accepted it until the 1960s. Worse still, Lerone Bennett, Jr., has pointed out “[n]ot only historians, but Negroes accepted these myths.”⁷⁴ The unfortunate shadow cast by revisionist historians had utterly eclipsed the noble efforts and admirable credentials of the black leaders of Reconstruction. Other than a string of newspaper articles in the black press and some in the white, and a few studies such as W.E.B. DuBois's monumental *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, for more than half of the twentieth century

⁷³ During the time this article was being researched I was sightseeing in Harlem, New York, when I fortuitously ran into some of the direct descendents of Robert Smalls. They were pleased to share with me the recent honor bestowed upon Congressman Smalls's legacy in having a U.S. Army logistics support ship (LSV) named after him, the LSV-8 MG Robert Smalls, the first army vessel to be named after an African American.

⁷⁴ *Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619-1964* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1970), 200.

Bruce and his peers were generally ignored and dismissed as tragic or embarrassing anomalies.⁷⁵

That has all begun to change during the past forty years with the onslaught of scholarship that has rescued these black leaders from the distorted and skewed racist histories of the past. One of the most recent is Stephen Middleton's *Black Congressmen During Reconstruction: A Documentary Sourcebook*. This edited volume is filled with speeches and writings from a selection of African Americans serving in Congress during Reconstruction. Here in their own words we see that they were articulate, bright, passionate, polished, informed, and far more visionary and democratic than a majority of their white colleagues.

⁷⁵ The school of racist historiography was led by William Dunning and John Burgess of Columbia University but also included many other prominent historians, including Woodrow Wilson. In addition, other progressive and educated elites promoted the myth of black inferiority, including scientists, novelists, clergy, and corporate leaders. There were black scholars, such as W.E.B. DuBois and William Monroe Trotter, and white sympathizers, such as Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who challenged these distorted stereotypes through dogged research presented in scholarly publications, newspapers, and speeches. However, it must be pointed out that they were fighting an uphill battle.

