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The Colored Farmers' Alliance and Negro Disfranchisement in the South

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The Colored Farmers' Alliance and Negro Disfranchisement in the South
by
Sandranel Bahan

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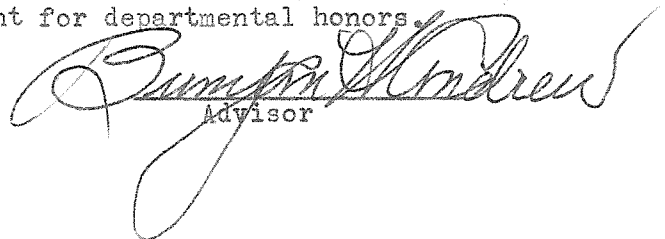
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Advisor

Introduction

To understand and evaluate fully and accurately the growth and impact of the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union that developed simultaneously with the Populist revolt, it is necessary to understand the motives and the grievances that were the roots of the agrarian revolt and the Populist party of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Of necessity, therefore, the first part of the paper is devoted to the general Populist revolt and the grievances of the farmer. The remainder of the paper will examine in depth the role of the Colored Alliance and will attempt to interpret the importance and the impact of the Colored Alliance in southern life and politics.

"There is something wrong with our industrial system. There is a screw loose. The wheels have dropped out of balance. The railroads have never been so prosperous, and yet agricultural languishes. The banks have never done a better or more profitable business, and yet agriculture languishes. Manufacturing enterprises never made more money or were in a more flourishing condition, and yet agriculture languishes. Towns and cities flourish and 'boom' and grow and 'boom' and yet agriculture languishes. Salaries and fees were never so temptingly high and desirable and yet agriculture languishes."¹

It is true that the blessings of civilization had not benefitted all of mankind equally. Not only in the United States, but in nearly all the agricultural countries of the world farmers complained of tariffs, gold standards, and prices. More had been given to the upper and middle classes than had been given to the lower, to the city dwellers rather than to the farmer. These inequities existed throughout the world, but in the United States the farmers were prepared if necessary to protest and seek redress through political action if necessary. Through the existing parties or by creating a new one the farmers in the Great Plains and throughout the South were determined to bring

¹Progressive Farmer (Raleigh), April 28, 1887

their grievances to the attention of the country and to work unceasingly to achieve improvement.²

The farmer did not blame himself for his lack of prosperity. In all sincerity he was convinced that he did not lack the industry and frugality to make a success of his farm and a profit from his land.³ He never doubted that his lack of prosperity was due to the low prices he received for commodities on the market. In the years from 1870 to 1897 there were steadily declining prices that only helped magnify and intensify his grievances. In certain sections of the country farming was actually carried on at a loss.⁴

Many of the so-called experts back east blamed gross overproduction for the farmers' plight. They argued that while it was true that the population of the country had nearly doubled in the past twenty years, the percentage of production increase by farmers had increased even more. Some suggested that since the western lands of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas were relatively new -- in terms of length of settlement -- they naturally produced a greater yield than the "old" farmlands of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and the southern United States.⁵

While the above excuses might have had validity, they were not the whole answer to the problems of the farmer by any means. The farmers

²O. S. Walker, "The Farmers' Movement," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, March 1894, 4:791

³Leonidas L. Polk, "The Farmers' Discontent," North American Review, July 1891, 153:9

⁴Henry R. Chamberlain, "The Farmers' Alliance and Other Political Parties," Chautauquan, June 1891, 13:388

⁵Rodney Welch, "The Farmers' Changed Condition," Forum, February 1891, 10:699

of the Great Plains had no choice but to use the railroads to send their crops to market. Consequently price exploitation and cooperative schemes to monopolize shipping characterized Great Plains farmer-railroad relations. In Minnesota and Dakota, for example, farmers were required to pay over half the value of their wheat just to ship it to Chicago to be sold.⁶ The fantastic prices were, according to the railroads, necessary for several reasons. First of all, nearly all the heavy traffic in the Great Plains and the South went in one direction -- east. The freight traffic to the grain market of Chicago was heavy, but the freight cars going west were nearly always empty. Secondly, the railroads in these areas were tremendously overbuilt. Even with the fantastic prices they charged for shipping, the railroads still lost money for the simple reason that there were too many of them.⁷ Third, farmers were required to pay the cost of shipping from, say, Mitchell, South Dakota to Chicago, even though the grain may not be headed all the way to Chicago. The railroad executives rationalized by arguing that unless they did this what was to prevent a farmer from shipping halfway and then shifting his grain to a cheaper line for the remainder of the trip, thus forcing the original shipper to continue the run to Chicago with empty cars, which meant a loss of revenue.⁸

⁶Thomas L. Greene, "Railroad Stock-watering," Political Science Quarterly, September 1891, 6:475, 489

⁷Pioneer Press, January 3, 27, 29, 1885

⁸John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt, Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1955, pg. 63

In addition to the above grievances, the farmers of the "last frontier" and the South had several more obstacles to fair prices and equal treatment. First there was discrimination and rate agreements between the elevator operators and the railroad lines. This cooperative arrangement meant that if a farmer wished to send his grain to market he had to first turn it over to the elevator in the nearest town. In addition the farmer was forced to ship his grain on whatever railroad line the elevator operator had a contract with, or forego any chance of getting his grain to market. Any attempt by an individual or a small group of farmers to set up private elevators on their own property or alongside the nearest railroad line was doomed to failure since the railroads refused to first of all deal with any except established grain elevators, and secondly to stop anywhere but at regularly scheduled intervals to collect their freight.⁹

A second obstacle lay in the fact that any attempt at legislative redress for the above grievances was impossible since through lobbying and outright bribery the railroads dominated the political situation, particularly in the western states. In Kansas it was the Santa Fe and in Nebraska the Burlington and the Union Pacific lines that controlled the majority of important votes in the legislatures. Any attempt by the farmers in these and other states to get measures introduced into law didn't have a chance in the face of railroad money and railroad control of capital in the states.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., pg. 67

¹⁰Hallie Farmer, "The Railroads and Frontier Populism," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, March 1924, 10:406-427

The final insult and deepest grievance of the farmer, though, was the "theft" of free land by the railroads. The lands of the American West were supposed to have been given to the American farmers by the federal government. The railroads had, however, established claims to much of this "public domain" and had proceeded to sell the land at a considerable price per acre, particularly to immigrants who had no idea what was going on. The demand for free land and for homesteads in the newly opened territories is best exemplified by the great Oklahoma land rush when men were literally trampled to death in the rush for free tillable land. The railroads, the farmers argued, were stealing from them what had in theory at least been given freely by the federal government for homesteading by private citizens.¹¹

It has been said that there were three crops raised in Nebraska -- one of corn, one of freight rates, and one of interest. The corn was produced by the farmer; the freight rates and the interest were raised by men who sat behind their desks and farmed the farmer.¹² Many farms and most of the machinery in the west were too heavily mortgaged for the owner to sell and move back east. Consequently, over the years many farmers, in order to keep going, had increasingly mortgaged their property until they were so heavily in debt that they were mortgaged beyond their appraised value. During the 1880's there was a large percentage of bankruptcy cases, particularly on the Plains. No longer

¹¹Fred E. Haynes, James Baird Weaver, Iowa City, Iowa, University of Iowa Press, 1919, pg. 164

¹²Farmers' Alliance, August 23, 1890

could the farmer pick up and go west to new lands and new opportunities.¹³ There was no frontier to turn to. The Great Plains were their last chance. They either stayed and struggled for existence from year to year, or declared bankruptcy and moved back east or into the larger cities.¹⁴

All that has been said about the west is equally applicable to the South and to the Negro with one addition. Along with mortgaged property and machinery, the southern farmer was faced with yearly crop liens that ate up any profit he might have and often forced him to go into debt in order to live through the winter and pay for the Spring planting. Again, in addition to the crop liens, most Negroes and some poor whites in the South were victims of absentee ownership and an inability to get anyone to merely look at their situation or discuss their needs. The southern Negro tenant farmers were faced with indifference from their landlords, the railroads, and their white counterparts, plus the businessmen and the government. The future seemed only to offer more of the same.¹⁵

The Alliance

The Alliance movement in the United States grew out of the frustration generated by the above-stated grievances of the American farming population. The first real Alliance group is said to have been started in Illinois on April 15, 1880, by Milton George. The

¹³J. Willis Gleed, "Western Lands and Mortgages," Forum, June 1891, 11:468-471

¹⁴Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History, New York, 1921

¹⁵Alex Arnett, The Populist Movement in Georgia, New York, 1922, 57-58

group's official name was the Farmers' Alliance of Cook County, Illinois. George was a well-to-do farmer who was to supply the necessary capital to support this and many subsequent Alliance groups throughout the Midwest. In its charter the Alliance issued a condemnation of the existing railroad system and specifically advocated government control of the railroads to bring about price schedule regularities.¹⁶ The Alliance idea spread rapidly and organizations developed rapidly throughout the Midwest due to the continuing hard times. The organization met with the greatest popularity in Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota, where conditions were the worst; and with slightly less success in Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Missouri.¹⁷

During the years 1882 to 1884 the Alliance movement declined as crops and prices improved somewhat, but poor crops and hard times had returned by 1885. By 1887, when the Alliance groups held a national convention in Minneapolis, the Alliance movement was once again gaining momentum, and enthusiasm among the delegates was high. Their encouragement was strengthened further by events in the South.¹⁸

The Southern Alliance began as a localized movement in a rural Texas county. It is distinguished from the Northern Alliance primarily by its adherence to secret rituals -- something the Northern Alliance

¹⁶Western Rural, October 23, 1880
Chicago Tribune, October 15, 1880

¹⁷Report of the Commission of Agriculture for the Years 1881 and 1882, pp. 580-86

¹⁸Western Rural, December 27, February 9, 1884; March 7, 1885;
October 8, 15, 22, 1887

saw no need for -- and secret operations. In addition the Texas organization functioned as a social group, providing aid and comfort to neighbors who were ill or having difficulty.¹⁹ The Alliance in Texas grew rapidly and began to spread beyond its local origins when it joined with a similar group in Louisiana.²⁰ Before long the Southern Alliance covered the entire South and boasted nearly twice as many members as its sister group to the North.²¹

In 1889 at a joint meeting in St. Louis, three major issues were to prevent unification of the Northern and Southern Alliance into one large national Alliance. The first disagreement was over the name by which the new group would be called. The larger of the two groups, the Southern Alliance, had decided upon calling the national organization the Farmers' and Laborers' Union. The Northern Alliance objected to the abandonment of the word Alliance and proposed instead to call the group the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union. This was readily solved when the southerners gave in with little opposition to the northerners proposal. This was considered a minor and irrelevant point of contention. The second was the question of the exclusion of Negroes from membership. The Northern Alliance had always welcomed Negroes into membership, while the Southern Alliance had been proclaimed

¹⁹W. Scott Morgan, History of the Wheel and Alliance, and the Impending Revolution, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1889, pg. 281

²⁰Ibid., pg. 293

²¹Polk, op. cit., pg. 11

exclusively for white men, and to placate the Negro had aided in establishing a colored counterpart to the Southern Alliance. This point of contention was rather easily solved by simply inserting a clause saying that each state organization would decide for itself if it wished to include Negroes in its mambership.

It was the third area of disagreement that was to prevent unification of the two Alliance groups. The North had never felt the need for any secrecy regarding Alliance activities and felt no compulsion to submerge itself in secrecy just when Alliance popularity was reaching its peak. The Southern Alliance, in contrast, had from the very beginning emphasized the need for secrecy in its activities. Since the North saw no need for secrecy and the South was apparently afraid to expose its organization openly, union between the two never became an actual fact. Their aims were similar but the names remained separate throughout the Alliance movement.

A fourth point of disagreement was not yet a major point of contention but would, in three years, become the major source of division between the two Alliance groups. This was the question of a third party movement. In the beginning both the North and South were content to work within the two existing national parties in hopes of gaining control particularly of the legislatures of the states and of the nation and thereby shifting emphasis from big business to the farmers and correcting the existing imbalances. It soon became apparent, however, at least in the north, that more would be needed and that a distinct

third party with a specific platform and strong candidates might become a necessity in upcoming elections. In the South, southern affinity to the Democratic party was so strong that the idea of the Alliance striking out as a separate party was a horrifying thought. Here too, the two groups were to go their separate ways and work independently to achieve the same ends.²²

As the conference drew to a close four specific areas of activity were to emerge as the major aims of the Alliance movement. First, the Alliance was to be a social organization. Visiting groups were created in local communities to give physical, material, and spiritual aid during crises or periods of hardship. When a neighbor was sick or had suffered some loss, Alliance members would give comfort and aid until the family was back on its feet again. Every holiday on the calendar was used as an excuse to hold an Alliance get-together. These special days offered usually the only opportunity for members in a given area to get together and discuss problems and accomplishments. Sometimes couples traveled thirty miles or more to come to an Alliance picnic or party.

A second aim of the Alliance was education. In North and South Carolina particularly, but in the other states as well, there was active agitation for the establishment of Agricultural colleges

²²

St. Louis Globe Democrat, December 7, 1889

Alliance meetings were not only devoted to having fun and seeing old friends, but also to discussion of new farming methods, the latest farm implements, and any new innovations that might improve farming and bolster profits. Information was provided on crop improvement, fertilization, and any thing and every thing that might help the farmers. Also from these meetings came the agitation for the establishment of agricultural colleges where farmers could learn advanced farming techniques. Education, college education, was stressed as a means of giving farmers new understanding of how to solve their problems and be better farmers and businessmen.

The third aim of the Alliance was financial. By setting up cooperatives and grain elevators and exchanges the Alliance, especially in the South, hoped to ease the farmers burden and give them easy credit and better financial arrangements. In addition, the members of the cooperatives would share in any profits and perhaps add somewhat to their yearly income.

The final aim of the Alliance was political. Beginning in local communities and spreading into state and national government, the Alliance hoped, through active political participation, to break the stranglehold that the railroads had on the law-making powers and achieve some type of government control of prices. It was generally agreed that the best way to do this was by gaining control of the legislatures in the states and in Washington -- control the law-making body rather than

executive offices which had little real power to enact and enforce changes except as directed by legislative action.²³

Since in 1890 there would be no presidential election, it was considered a off-election year by politicians and there was little enthusiasm generated concerning the elections. Little enthusiasm, that is, with the exception of the Alliance. In the Alliance states complacent politicians got a rude awakening. In Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota the respective Alliances elected full slates of candidates to local offices, and ate deeply into the Republican majority in North Dakota, Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Colorado. In many cases this meant that while the Alliance failed to win the elections, the Republicans, many of them long-time incumbents, also lost and Democrats took over in many of the state legislatures. The traditional control of the party had disappeared in the face of widespread discontent and vigorous activity by the Alliance groups.

In South Carolina, the Alliance leader, Ben Tillman, was elected governor. The Alliance controlled the legislatures in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. In addition to this astounding success in state elections the Alliances were able to elect forty-four representatives and three Senators to Congress. The traditional strongholds of the Republicans

²³Hicks, op. cit., pp. 128-152

in the north and west and the old Democratic party in the South had been shaken to their conservative foundations. The idea of a successful third party was no longer an impossible dream.²⁴

Encouraged by their successes the Southern Alliance at Ocala, Florida, in December 1890, and the Northern Alliance at Omaha in January 1891 set down a specific program of reform for the future. In essence the two Alliances sought the same things, and six "demands" can be delineated as their common goals. The first was free silver, an issue which at first really concerned the North and South very little, but which would prove politically expedient for them in the West. By advocating free silver they would attract those men from the western mining states who had been pressing for free silver for several years with little success. Second was abolition of the national banks; third, government ownership of railroads and telegraphs; fourth, prohibition of alien land ownership; fifth, a constitutional amendment to elect the president, vice-president, and all senators by direct vote of the people; and sixth, adoption of the Australian ballot system.²⁵ The last two demands were to be successful and the issue of free silver would become a major national election issue.

In 1892, the North and South were faced with the most difficult

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 153-185

²⁵ National Economist, February 17, 1891

decision to date. Northern Alliance members had decided to establish a definite and distinct third party with a separate slate of candidates for the national as well as state and local elections. The South was in a dilemma. The Democrats had nominated Cleveland, who was anti-thema to southerners, as their candidate for president. Many Alliance men would almost rather join the new third party than support the Democratic candidate, even though it meant going against everything they had always believed in and taught. Some did buck the party, but most swallowed their distaste and followed party line. In those states where the third party had significant support the campaign was heated and ugly. In Alabama, Texas, Georgia, and the Carolinas, the third party seemed to be in a majority, but in the balloting the traditional Democratic machine prevailed. The elections in the South were distinguished by ballot-stuffing, bribery, intimidation, beatings --- all the tricks of the trade. In one county in Georgia Tom Watson, a prominent Alliance man lost by twice as many votes as there were registered voters. The third party lost heavily in the north, too, although here it was a case of not having enough of the right things. The candidates were unpopular, ^{and} the program ^{was} unappealing to many.²⁶

In 1894 and 1896 the third party, now known as the Populist party, tried again. In 1894 the party showed strength not only in the

²⁶ Hicks, op. cit., pp. 238-273

South and midwest farming regions, but also among urban workers. But the fusion of the Populists in 1896 with the Democratic national ticket was a fatal mistake.²⁷ What had begun in 1890 as a strong, unified, successful political movement was after the disastrous election of 1896 to lose its glamor and much of its strength.

Politically the Populist movement had failed, but it did achieve several notable accomplishments. As a result of Alliance agitation the Australian ballot was adopted, woman suffrage was enacted, the seventeenth amendment providing for direct election of senators was passed, primary elections for party nominations became the common practice, and both the referendum and recall became part of our governmental system. In addition to these very positive accomplishments the Alliance movement was directly responsible for the federal government's reevaluation of the currency and for governmental agricultural study and reform that culminated in the establishment of the Department of Agriculture. The Alliance and the Populist party helped to undermine the intense party loyalties to the Republicans in the North and the Democrats in the South. Never again would things be quite the same for the two parties. And finally, the Populist movement led to the disfranchisement of the Negroes in the South.²⁸ It is to this final negative accomplishment that the remainder of this paper shall be devoted.

²⁷ Jack Abramovitz, "The Negro in the Populist Movement," Journal of Negro History, July 1953, 38:3, PP. 257-289

²⁸ Hicks, op. cit., pp. 404-423

The Southern Alliance had been formed as a purely "white man's party." But to placate the Negroes and also to utilize their political potential, the Southern Alliance advocated and supported the establishment of a colored counterpart eventually to be known as the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union. The Colored Alliance was first formed as a local organization in Houston County, Texas, on December 11, 1886. On December 29, 1886, it became a statewide organization and by 1888 had achieved national status. The general superintendent of the Colored Alliance was R. M. Humphrey, a white Baptist missionary, but the rest of the officials were Negro. This was not the first Negro agrarian organization. The earliest post-bellum organization had been the Patrons of Husbandry which began in Washington, D. C., in 1867. Following this was the Greenback Labor Party of Richmond, Virginia. Although a white organization, Negro Union leaders had participated in the founding convention.²⁹

The margin of existence of Negro farmers was virtually wiped out in the years from 1876 to 1896.³⁰ Thus the promise of economic benefits as well as the secret rituals of the Southern-styled organization in the year 1886 appealed to the Negro farmers. For the Negroes, as for all the Alliance members, membership in such an organization was occasioned by the low prices of agricultural products, the high-

²⁹ Jack Abramovitz, "The Negro in the Agrarian Revolt," Agricultural History, April 1950, 24:2, pg. 91

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 89

priced manufactured goods, the social needs of the farmer, the love of secrecy, and the marked evangelical fervor of the Southern movement.³¹ By July 1888 there was a network of cooperative exchanges that spread from Houston through New Orleans, Mobile, and Charleston to Norfolk. In 1889 the Colored Alliance began publishing a weekly newspaper at Houston called the National Alliance which was to be the Negro counterpart of the white Alliance's National Economist.³²

What the Colored Alliance hoped to accomplish ultimately can best be seen in the Declaration of Principles of the Colored Alliance:

"To elevate the colored people of the United States by teaching them to love their country and their homes; to care more for their helpless and sick and destitute; to labor more earnestly for the education of themselves and their children, especially in agricultural pursuits.

"To become better farmers and laborers and less wasteful in their methods of living.

"To be more obedient to the civil law and withdraw their attention from political partisanship.

"To become better citizens and truer husbands and wives."³³

The Colored Alliance apparently sought close ties with the

³¹William DuBose Sheldon, Populism in the Old Dominion, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1935, pg. 35

³²Abramovitz, Agricultural History, pg. 92

³³Edward Wiest, Agricultural Organization in the United States, Lexington, Kentucky, University of Kentucky, 1923

Southern Alliance in the belief that by working with their white counterparts they could effect more positive results from their endeavors. This, however, does not apply to every state Alliance. The Colored Alliance in the first place was most active in the South, since northern Alliance groups allowed Negro members in the original organization, thereby eliminating any real need for a separate colored Alliance. Secondly, relationships between the white and colored Alliances varied in degree from state to state. In Virginia there was virtually no connection whatever between the two,³⁴ while in Georgia the two were hard to separate.³⁵

There are several reasons for this disparity in southern relations. Most important, in Virginia in particular, the Negroes were carefully regimented by the Republican political bosses, and consequently such a potentially political organization as the Colored Alliance was not to be encouraged.³⁶ In addition, in North Carolina, the white populace wished that the Negroes would leave the state and be replaced by white settlers. But since the state depended heavily on Negro labor, when the Negroes did start migrating northward in large numbers in the 1880's there was widespread alarm.³⁷

One of the agrarian leaders in North Carolina was Leonidas Lafayette

³⁴Sheldon, op. cit., pg. 35

³⁵Abramovitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 271

³⁶Sheldon, op. cit., pg. 35

³⁷Stuart Noblin, Leonidas Lafayette Polk, Agrarian Crusader Chapel Hill, North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, pg. 199

Polk, longtime president of the Southern Alliance. In 1887 Polk had claimed that one of the defects of the agricultural system in the South was the Negro tenant system, and suggested that this tenant system be replaced by white immigration.³⁸ Then when faced with mass migration of the Negroes northward, many North Carolinians protested against the disqualification of voters and the curtailment of educational opportunities that had led many Negroes to abandon the state, and condemned the Farmers' Alliance as an oppressive institution to the colored laborer.³⁹

In Georgia there was a unique experiment in Negro-white relations led by young Tom Watson. Watson and the Georgia Alliance not only desired Negro support, they actively sought it. Both the Negroes and the whites in Georgia were groping for the way to a new relationship that held the promise of advancement for the Negro economically and politically.⁴⁰ It was a valiant, though futile, attempt to break from southern tradition and static beliefs.

At the time of the Ocala convention for the Southern Alliance in 1890 the Colored Alliance also met at Ocala. From these two conventions the two Alliance groups emerged virtually fused into one Alliance of over four million members, since the Southern Alliance claimed over two million members, while the Colored Alliance approached the two million mark in membership.⁴¹ Out of the Ocala convention

³⁸Ibid., pg. 201

³⁹Ibid., pg. 199

⁴⁰Abramovitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 270

⁴¹Ibid., pg. 260

came seven demands that would have meant the enactment of thirteen new laws. The Ocala demands were:⁴²

1. a) abolish national banks
b) establish a subtreasury plan
c) permit two percent land loans direct to the people
d) increase the volume of money to \$50 per capita
2. prohibit dealing in futures
3. free coinage of silver
4. a) prohibit alien ownership of land
b) forfeit unearned railway land grants and limit landholding
5. a) revise the tariff in the interest of the producer
b) graduated income tax
c) reduce government expenditures
6. efficient control of the railroads
7. election of United States Senators by direct vote of the people

These seven demands resemble those emerging from the Southern Alliance convention at Ocala and the Northern Alliance meeting at Omaha.

At the national Alliance convention in 1891 in Cincinnati, the Southern Alliance attempted to force segregation on the colored delegates. The motion was overwhelmingly defeated. It was from this convention that the call for a third party came, and the Colored Alliance supported it wholeheartedly.⁴³ At the national convention from which emerged the Populists' first national ticket the Colored Alliance was second only

⁴²Noblin, op. cit., pg. 203

⁴³Abramovitz, Agricultural History, pg. 91

to the Northern Alliance in the number of delegates attending.⁴⁴

Since Ocala in 1890 there had been several points of disagreement between the Southern and the Colored Alliance. In 1891 the Colored Alliance had called for a general strike of cotton pickers. This of course infuriated Southern farmers, particularly those who were members of the Southern Alliance. Also the Colored Alliance had favored the enactment of the Lodge Force Bill in 1892 and had supported the upstart Alliance member who had voted against the disfranchisement of Negroes in Mississippi.⁴⁵

From reconstruction times until the election of 1892 Negro voting in the South had existed on suffrage only, since it was well understood that the Republicans were to have no chance to win. This situation finally commanded the attention of the small Republican majority in Congress that was returned by the election of 1888 and a Federal Elections Bill designed to provide adequate protection to the colored Republican voter through federal supervision of congressional elections and, if necessary, the exercise of military power, was forced through the House of Representatives. In the Senate, however, the bill met defeat, thanks to the fact that a small group of western silver Republicans joined with the Democrats to vote the bill out of its place on the calendar and thus make way for the consideration of the silver bill. Bitter resentment in the South over this attempted northern interference with "home rule" was freely expressed, and there was a general feeling

⁴⁴Hicks, op. cit., pg 236

⁴⁵Abramovitz, Agricultural History, pg. 91

of relief when the "Lodge Bill" or the "Force Bill" as it was usually called, was definitely shelved. All this agitation told heavily against the new third party in the South, and at least one state, Mississippi, promptly adopted into its constitution what seemed to be a satisfactory legal formula for eliminating the Negro vote.⁴⁶

By the election of 1892 the third party was a reality, and Kansas was one of the first states to appeal to the Negroes for support. Several Negroes were nominated for political offices on the party slate and there was an active drive to enlist Negroes to give support in the election. In Texas, too, there was an open appeal for Negroes to run for certain offices and to generally support the party's activities.⁴⁷ The activities in search of Negro support in Georgia have already been noted.

In 1892 the southern Democrats were running scared. By now the Colored Alliance boasted a total membership of two million and had become a definite force in southern politics. Since the first discussions concerning the creation of a separate third party the Colored Alliance had been one of its strongest supporters. Now, since the Democrats had chosen Cleveland as their presidential nominee for the forthcoming national elections, the Colored Alliance stood a good chance of uniting with unhappy southerners against the Democratic machine and breaking the party's control over southern politics. Cleveland was disliked

⁴⁶Hicks, op. cit., pp. 251-253

⁴⁷Abramovitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 273

intensely throughout the South because of his "hard money" views and was accused of being a front for the Wall Street financial kings. Thus Cleveland's nomination rallied many supposedly hard-core Democrats to the third party standard.⁴⁸

The Democratic party in the South had always prided itself on being a "white man's party". Over the years since reconstruction the South had built up its essentially one-party system to the point that many Negroes, though supporters of the Republican party, no longer bothered to exercise their constitutional privilege of voting. During the election of 1892 the new Populist party in the South sought Negro support but at the same time called itself a "white man's party." This left the Colored Alliance caught in the middle. They saw that by supporting the Populists it stood a small chance at least of gaining some influence and control in Southern politics. At the same time, many Colored Alliance members were threatened, beaten, and intimidated in countless ways to prevent their voting for the Populist candidates. In addition, many Negroes who had no connection whatever with the Alliance or the Populists were bullied and coerced into voting as directed or not voting at all.⁴⁹

The election of 1892, in effect, boiled down to an all-out campaign to preserve the Democratic control in the South by whatever means necessary. Vicious name-calling, physical attacks, economic measures, threats --

⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 275

⁴⁹ Ibid., pg. 280

anything in short that would prevent third party support -- were resorted to. It was, for all intents and purposes, a dirty, messy fight to the bitter end and any means of winning was sanctioned. When it finally came time to vote, though, the Populists still had sufficient reason to hope, and in some cases to feel reasonably certain that their candidates would win, particularly in Georgia, Texas, and surprisingly, Alabama.⁵⁰ But, when the votes were counted, the Populist party's and the Negroes' hopes had been reduced to mere fantasies. Throughout the South the Democrats had scored overwhelming victories. Why?

First of all, the threat of a third party successfully moving in on Democratic territory was enough to make the toughest racist Democrat even tougher. The threat of the third party move boiled down to one word -- nigger.⁵¹ So long as the Populists attempted an entente with the Colored Alliance they stood little real chance of making any gains in the South, no matter who the Democratic nominee was. Cleveland to the South, was better any day than a man like Frederick Douglass or a "nigger"-loving Tom Watson. Southern politicians had appealed to the racism in the southern personality by claiming during the campaign that since the Negro Alliancemen were more numerous than the whites they could outvote them in the Supreme Council (a silly argument

⁵⁰Hicks, op. cit., pg. 238-273

⁵¹Joseph H. Taylor, "Populism and Disfranchisement in Alabama," Journal of Negro History, October 1949, pg. 415

really, since the numerical majority in the Supreme Council was overwhelmingly white) of the Southern Alliance and with the support of the north could force a program of government allotment of lands belonging to white farmers to negroes, as well as enact the "Force Bill" in Congress. The mere threat of this was the most effective way to keep white voters from turning to the new leaders of the Populist party.⁵² Added to this was the widespread contention that a Populist victory would mean Negro supremacy and eventual race mongrelization.⁵³

Secondly, still unsure of how successful thier propaganda campaign had been, the Democrats resorted to cheating. Ballot-stuffing, bribery, faulty counting, and intimidation of voters were all rampant on election day. As mentioned before, Tom Watson lost by twice as many votes as there were registered voters in his district in Georgia. In Alabama and Mississippi, Negroes were beaten or bribed or both as they came to the polling places. As many whites as Negroes were turned away from the polls on every trumped up charge they could think of. The Democratic machine was in high gear and determined to everything necessary to win.⁵⁴

Third, many Negroes refused to vote. By doing so they hoped to accomplish two things. First they sought to avoid personal difficulty. Many had been so harassed during the campaign that they feared for their lives, their livelihood, and their family's safety if they showed up to

⁵²Ibid., pg. 416

⁵³Abramovitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 255

⁵⁴Hicks, op. cit., pg. 238-273

vote. Second, many, Alliance members in particular, operated on the theory that by reducing the number of votes cast, they would make it difficult for the Democrats to steal many ballots. Unfortunately their strategy failed. Only in North Carolina did this move meet with any real success and even here it was more a case of the Southern Alliance being strong enough to offset Democratic tactics than of the Negroes being any really major political force.⁵⁵ Above all else the election of 1892 made it apparent that economic issues must remain subordinate to the racial problem in the South so long as the Negroes were a potential factor in politics.⁵⁶

From 1890 to 1892 the Alliance had controlled nearly every legislature in the South. The Democratic party was virtually run by Alliancemen. Why then, in the big test, had the Alliance -- and the Populist party -- failed so miserably? Henry Demarest Lloyd offers perhaps the best explanation:

"The Democrats, the 'classes,' hate the new people who have dared to question the immemorial supremacy of their aristocratic rule, and who have put into actual association, as not even the Republicans have done, political brotherhood with the despised Negroes."⁵⁷

Following the fiasco of 1892 and after again suffering defeat in 1894 the Populists began a critical examination to find the cause

⁵⁵Abramovitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 284

⁵⁶Sheldon, op. cit., pg. 92

⁵⁷Lloyd in St. Louis Globe Democrat, July 23, 1896

of their failure in the South. Always the answer came back to the same thing -- the Colored Alliance. Although from its inception the Colored Alliance had been tied inevitably to the all-white Southern Alliance the Negroes of the Colored Alliance had made a great stride to political independence. Their establishment of a weekly newspaper, the formulation of their own "Ocala demands", their overwhelming support of the national third party movement made the Colored Alliance important in itself. Although first attracted by the promise of sharing in the white man's ritual and hoped-for prosperity the Colored Alliance soon outgrew its original need for association with the Southern Alliance. By 1892 this organization of two million men and women had become a strong, independent, unified political group. Although after 1892 the Colored Alliance was absorbed into the Populist party and ceased to be a separate organization, the frightening memory lingered in the South.⁵⁸

In preparing for the election of 1894 many southerners began seriously toying with the idea of disfranchising the Negro. Even some Populists believed that disfranchisement of the Negroes would remove the need that the Democrats felt to fake election results, and would result, if not in a Populist victory, at least a fair election.⁵⁹ For the time being, however, it was treated only as a possibility, not as a probability. But the collapse of Populism after 1896 put an end to the one movement that had every chance of producing a truly

⁵⁸Abramovitz, Agricultural History, pg. 90

⁵⁹Abramovitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 287

emancipated South in which the Negro would have been accorded a respectable position which might in time have broken down hostility and suspicion between Negro and white.⁶⁰

By 1901 practically every state in the South had enacted measures designed to disfranchise the majority of the Negro voters.⁶¹ Poll taxes, grandfather clauses, impossible literacy tests were part of every state constitution. All of these repressive measures were, first of all, the result of bitter resentment and fear growing out of the debates over the Lodge Force Bill. These fears were given support and enhanced by the emergence of the Colored Farmers' Alliance. The South had been, quite frankly, shaken to its depths by the unexpected emergence of a strong, well-organized Negro Alliance. Suddenly the Negro was no longer willing to be docile and take whatever meager handouts the whites offered. Now, in 1890, these uneducated, oppressed, penniless Southern Negroes were joining together in a common effort to improve themselves and their position in life.

It was immaterial that the Negroes had last served in state legislatures over twenty years ago, in 1775-76.⁶² It was also immaterial that the Colored Alliance had disappeared after 1892, having been absorbed into the national Populist party. It meant little that the majority of the southern Negroes were so frightened by their white

⁶⁰Ibid., pg. 289

⁶¹Taylor, op. cit., pg. 415

⁶²Ibid., pg. 415

neighbors and political bosses that they would never dare take any positive action. What did matter was that there was emerging a small but effective core of Negro leaders who, given time to plead their cause, could conceivably encourage the members of their race to do more than dream or accept token membership in a colored organization, or talk about doing something. With time and unhindered men such as W. E. B. DuBois or Frederick Douglass could make the Negro a vital force in southern politics. All the white southerner had to do was to look back to what transpired in the election of 1890 and to the appeals directed to the Negro voting populace in 1892 to see what could happen. So long as the Negro in the South was allowed to exercise their right to vote southerners would never be free of the fear of Negro domination. Disfranchisement was the only solution.

The emergence of the Colored Farmer's Alliance and the disfranchisement of the Negro in the South go hand in hand. Of this there is no question and there is ample documentary proof to support any statement to that effect. Evaluation of the Colored Alliance itself is a different matter.

There are no existing documents or official records of the Colored Alliance.⁶³ Neither are there any copies of the Colored Alliance's weekly newspaper in existence.⁶⁴ Therefore, any information on the Colored Alliance must come from secondary sources. The only "original" source is Dunning's Farmers' Alliance History which contains a sketchy chapter devoted to the Colored Alliance. The two men who are probably the most knowledgeable on the subject of the Colored Alliance disagree on several major points. John Hicks says that the Colored Alliance was for all intents and purposes a subsidiary of the Southern Alliance with no real political power outside of what the Southern Alliance condescended to allow it.⁶⁵ Jack Abramowitz contends that while the Colored Alliance was originally founded by the Southern Alliance to placate the Negro farmers who wanted to share in the Alliance movement, over a period of time the Colored Alliance emerged on an equal par with the Southern Alliance and separated itself from it.⁶⁶ Hicks says also that 1892 was the year that the Populists started to decline.⁶⁷ Abramowitz

⁶³Abramowitz, Agricultural History, pg. 90

⁶⁴Ibid., pg. 91

⁶⁵Hicks, op. cit., pg. 115

⁶⁶Abramowitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 270

⁶⁷Hicks, op. cit., pg 267

contends that the Populists and the Colored Alliance were only reaching their peak when they made the fatal mistake of joining with the Democrats in the election of 1896.⁶⁸

Upon investigation of election results, membership claims, and Alliance activities, it would seem that both were correct about the decline of Populism, depending upon of which section of the country one is speaking. Certainly after 1892 the Alliance in the South was on the decline, particularly in regards to the third party movement. In the North, however, the populists, although they lost the election had shown surprising strength, particularly in the west. Their big defeat was not to come until 1896. With regard to the importance of the Colored Alliance, however, it would seem that Abramovitz has the stronger argument.

The mere fact that the Colored Alliance boasted nearly two million members indicates that it offered something tangible and significant to southern Negro farmers. Not only did it hold out the fascination of secret rituals and underground activities, it met a very pressing educational and social need. Visiting teams of housewives and farmers were organized in local communities to give aid and comfort to the sick, to those who had lost considerable property during storms, to families where there was a death. It gave them a chance to break the routine monotony of plowing, planting, and harvesting, and to share experiences and problems with their neighbors. At the same time through Alliance printing services and special programs at local meetings, information

68

Abramovitz, Journal of Negro History, pg. 276

on how to improve farming methods and increase production was disseminated to the Negro farming populace. Alliancemen were encouraged to give their children as much education as possible and to even educate themselves so that they could not be exploited by white businessmen and unscrupulous speculators. The Colored Alliance appealed to the Negroes' pride, what little had been left to them by southern whites.

The Colored Alliance in particular and the Negro voting populace in general must have offered a potentially vital political force for two very obvious reasons. First, the National Alliance actively sought the support and the membership of Negroes. Second, every southern state added an amendment to its constitution that in effect disfranchised the Negro. If the Colored Alliance did not offer some kind of threat to traditional southern politics, then why would the Populists seek its support? In nearly every phase of its activity the Colored Alliance seems to have closely paralleled the actions of its white counterpart. Yet in several instances the Colored Alliance, according to most sources struck out on its own. The Colored Alliance and the Southern Alliance were at opposite poles over the question of the Lodge Force Bill. The Colored Alliance unhesitatingly supported the third party movement when it was proposed, while the Southern Alliance held back out of loyalty to the Southern Democrat tradition. In 1892 members of the Colored Alliance actively campaigned for the third party ticket, while the Southern Alliance was internally divided over which party to support. Consequently the Alliance, because of internal division, lost much of its influence in southern politics, while the Colored Alliance loomed as

a major force in southern politics.

Haywood Burns, in his Voices of Negro Protest in America, suggests that there was an entente between Negro and poor southern white farmers as Alliancemen, in which they attempted by working together to bring improvements in their social and economic condition.⁶⁹ Abramovitz hesitates to put it quite that strongly. Instead he suggests that the Alliance movement offered the opportunity for such a union, but that the southern traditional attitude and extenuating circumstances prevented any entente from emerging out of the Alliance movement.

The Colored Alliance offers an excellent example of the tremendous possibilities for social action that existed within the Negro community. In another society where there would be more social and political freedom, the Colored Alliance could conceivably and probably would have taken on all the aspects and engaged in all of the activities traditionally associated with a political party. But not in the 1890's and not in the southern United States. If the South was frightened by the Colored Alliance of the 1890's it would be apoplectic over the existence of such a group today. Allowing the Negroes to vote in the South following reconstruction, whether there was a Constitutional amendment to support the Negro franchise or not, was politically and socially expedient. In doing so there was a pretext at least of allowing Negroes

⁶⁹W. Haywood Burns, The Voices of Negro Protest in America, New York, Oxford University Press, 1963, pg. 20

virtually the same rights as the white citizens, whether the South thought the Negroes were entitled to equal rights or not. But the Negro voters overstepped their bounds when they actively supported the Populist party. Never before had Negro votes counted particularly in an election. Never before had white candidates purposely and actively sought Negro votes. Southern political and social stratification was seriously threatened. Something had to be done. Physical beatings coercion, bribery would only treat the effect, not the cause. The southern political leaders felt compelled to strike down the Negro by destroying his most valuable right as a citizen. They had to effectively and legally disfranchise the Negro. It is in the denial of one of the basic constitutional rights of any American citizen -- the right to vote -- that the Colored Farmers' Alliance played its most significant role.

Still southern reaction to the Colored Alliance was not entirely negative. Within the Southern Alliance there were men such as Tom Watson who honestly sought to ease the burden of the southern Negro. Particularly in Georgia, but in other southern states as well, there were attempts to effect a change in the traditional attitude towards the Negro and to achieve a more liberal attitude. Jack Abramovitz, in evaluating the Negro role in the agrarian revolt, says it is

"...interesting to note that the one great mass movement of the South, which grew out of the hopes and aspirations of the common people of that region strove manfully to adjust to liberal

and decent code of race relations, a code which recognized the Negro as a fellow toiler worthy of equal treatment in the political and economic spheres and a more equitable treatment in the realm of southern social life....⁷⁰

⁷⁰Abramovitz, Agricultural History, pg. 92

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