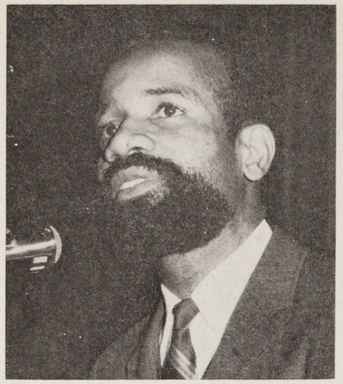
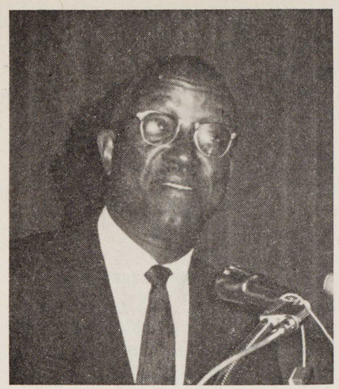
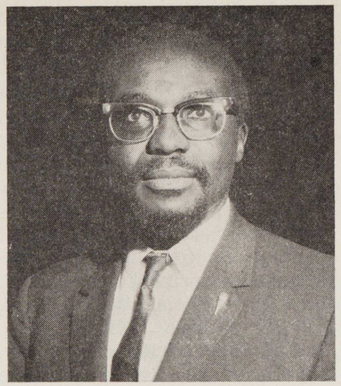


Lerone Bennett

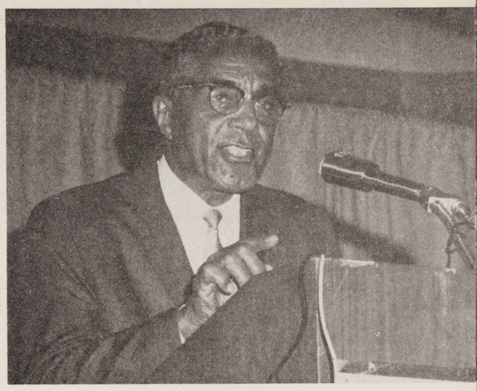
Dr. James McPherson



John Hope Franklin



Keith Baird



Dr. Charles Wesley

Education "Whiteout" A Report on the National Conference on Negro History

by Mildred Gladney

IN THE WORDS of the vernacular, "It was a happening." To the surprise of everyone, including the planners, the American Federation of Teacher's National Conference on Negro History, held in Washington, D.C. the first part of December, attracted over 1,300 people, mostly classroom teachers and mostly black Americans. The papers or addresses, all but two given by Afro-Americans, were excellent —scholarly, down-to-earth, stimulating, informative, incisive. There was the very real and meaningful confrontation between black thinkers and white thinkers that made the conference the exciting experience that it was.

The papers given dealt with racism in American education and its effects from two viewpoints, that of the historian and that of the black Americans. Those who presented the historian's viewpoint, themselves historians of great repute, gave scholarly and thorough papers that left little doubt that racism in American education is deliberate and planned.

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St. Clair Drake of Roosevelt University in Chicago in his paper "The African Past in Myth and Reality", told the conferees that accurate knowledge of African civilizations was common in Europe in the fifteenth century, that the "whiteout" of the history of Africa developed during the 19th century. Dr. Drake said that a complete and true picture of the Africa past must be given in textbooks and schools' curriculum in order to encourage in non-Afro-American children a favorable attitude towards Afro-Americans, particularly in the light of today's civil rights struggle. This would also help the Afro-American child to learn and accept his cultural heritage as African and so build his own self-image. Dr. Drake suggested several books which give the reality of the African past: W. E. B. DuBois' *Black Folk: Then and Now;* Basil Davidson's *The Lost Cities of Africa;* and Melville Herskovits' *The Myth of the Negro's Past.*

James McPherson discussed how white American's thinking about slavery and anti-slavery affected and continues to affect the role and status of Afro-Americans today in his paper "Slavery and Anti-Slavery in America." Dr. McPherson, a white historian at Princeton University indicated Ulrich B. Phillips, a Southern historian and author of *American Negro Slavery,* published in 1918, as the most influential proponent of the point of view that slavery in the United States was a humane system and of great benefit to the Negro race as it brought these fortunate ones into civilization. This opinion rested on two invalid assumptions of Phillips: one, the innate inferiority of the Negro (endorsed by scientists during this period); and two, a romanticized visualization of the Old South based on the financial reports of large slaveholders. Phillips wrote that the plantation was a school where the slaves, carefree and happy children, were well-cared for by kind and benevolent masters. The abolitionists (the white ones, of course) were fanatics and actually sabotaged the moderates' approach towards abolishing slavery, thereby causing the devastating Civil War. Phillips' viewpoint of American history prevailed in textbooks from the 1930's to the 1950's.

Since the 1950's the way of looking at slavery and the second class status of black Americans has changed. Kenneth Stamps, author of *The Peculiar Institution* is in the forefront of this new thinking. He writes that the Negro was forced into slavery as part of a plan for economic exploitation of cheap labor; that slavery rested on force and fear and produced feelings of nihilism in the slaves who were not happy and carefree children; and that the abolitionists were not fanatics but did force the confrontation that resulted in the Civil War.

Dr. McPherson stressed, however, that today's textbooks have not gone far enough in telling the complete story. The Afro-American is still treated as an invisible entity, a non-person. Very few of his contributions are discussed. The black abolitionist, the black fighter in the Civil War, the current civil rights struggle are ignored in all but one or two history books.

The prevailing theme of Lerone Bennett's paper, "A Tribute to Some Early Historians" was that black Americans are not just becoming aware of the importance of their role in the history of their country or of the deliberate distortion and neglect of this role. Such early pioneers as William C. Nell, a free black aboltionist writing in 1855, William Brown authoring in 1863 the first novel by an Afro-American and George W. Williams, a soldier in the Union Army publishing a *History of the Negro Race in America, 1619-1880* in 1883 said at great risk to themselves what black men are saying in comparative safety today. He pointed out that with W. E. B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson, "Black folk came of age." Bennett concluded by reminding us that "the truth is that the history of Europe is not the history of the world and the history of the American white is not the history of America."

"Reconstructing Reconstruction History" was delivered by John Hope Franklin, an authority on the Reconstruction era in American history. He told the conferees that most of what is said about Reconstruction is utterly false. The popular story of Reconstruction is based on Southern interpretation; the real facts are almost completely the reverse. There was never a military occupation of the South. The Freedman's Bureau, although supposedly supported by the Federal government had no appropriations for the first year of its existence. It offered aid to Afro-Americans and whites. The Afro-Americans in the legislatures were few in number and well-educated men. Many of the carpetbaggers could be likened to the