How President Wilson’s Peers Opposed Racial Segregation in the Federal Government

By Leigh Walters
Late 1800s Civil Service Reforms

- Pendleton Civil Service Act of 1883
- Competitive Civil Service Exam
- Civil Service Commission
- By 1907, African American federal employees in D.C. had quadrupled, reaching about 2800.
Governor Wilson: 1912 Progressive Party & Democratic Presidential Candidate

“New Freedom” Campaign

- Lower tariffs
- Break up monopolies
- Fair labor practices
- Views on immigration
William Monroe Trotter Endorses Wilson
Bishop Alexander Walters endorses Wilson

President of the Afro-American Council

Letter from Governor Wilson

My dear Bishop Walters:

It is a matter of genuine disappointment to me that I shall not be able to be present at the meeting on Saturday night, but inclement weather has made it necessary for me to be absent. I have been engaged, in view of the distressing events upon Mr. Roosevelt, to do all that I can properly to aid others. I am fulfilling only those to which I have been bound for many weeks.

It would afford me pleasure to be present, because there are certain things I want to say. I hope that it seems superfluous to those that know me, but to reassure my colored fellow citizens of my earnest wish to see justice done them in every matter, and not mere counting justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling, and absence of one law, every principle of our constitution, and that the colored people of the United States have made extraordinary efforts in the past, useful, and ought to be encouraged in every possible and proper way. I want you and them to be assured of my sympathy, and if I can do anything through you that should I become President of the United States, they may count on me. It is my absolute duty to the people of the United States, in advancing the interests of their race in the United States.

Cordially and sincerely yours,

Andrew Wilson.

Bishop Alexander Walters,
New York City.
President Wilson takes office in March 1913

- The Bureau of Engraving and Printing
- The Treasury Department
- Post Office Department
- April 1914 – Wilson issued an Executive Order that required photographs to accompany federal job applicants.
Belle La Follette criticizes Wilson’s Administration

La Follette’s Weekly Magazine
Archibald Henry Grimké

President D.C.’s NAACP chapter

Oct. 1913 rally at Metropolitan AME Church with 10,000 participants
Dr. Lucy Ella Moten

Dr. Moten’s letter to President Wilson

Oct. 7th, 1913

In short, Mr. President, we ask you to hurl your great power and influence against this new form of caste prejudice, and to follow in some degree the policy of the Great Lincoln—
now so often misquoted by present-day statesmen—whose policy was to give to every American citizen, irrespective of race, equal justice before the law and a free man’s chance. Once again, and in this connection, I have the honor to quote from your recent work “The New Freedom”, in which you declare that this country should be a land lifting

“to the admiration of the world its ideals of absolute free opportunity, where no man is supposed to be under any limitation except the limitations of his character and of his mind; where there is supposed to be no distinction of class, no distinction of blood, no distinction of social status, but where men win or lose on their merits.”

Yet, to the discouragement of the American colored man, blood distinction counts, and to such a degree, in some sections of our common country, that his very life is endangered in the exercise of his prerogatives as a citizen, in looking to the betterment of his social and political condition. The laws, indeed, should protect him in his thrift and in his freedom, and they should not be construed as so to restrict his uplift, as they are made to do in such segregation ordinances as recently enacted in the City of Baltimore, Maryland.

And it should cause little or no wonder then, if some of the able men among our colored citizens are at times in painful quandary as to whether or not it would be wiser to violently resist the open insults which the enforcement of some of these discriminatory statutes inspire, or to silently suffer and trust to the proverbial generosity and sense of fair-play of the better part of their white fellow-citizens, many of whom are none the less responsible for the enactment of such laws and for their enforcement.

Many of the leaders among the American colored people are at all times anxious to allay any violent resentment, and continually plead that this ill-advised and un-American legislation should no longer find a place in the statutes of the country. If, Mr. President, you could as the Chief Executive obtain a clearer conception of our status, and from the
Bibliography

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The Washington Post: Woodrow Wilson’s Racist Legacy
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Woodrow Wilson’s letter to Bishop Alexander Walters

Images:
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Belle La Follette
Boston Daily Globe: A Declaration of Independence and a New Freedom
The Boston Guardian Office
Bureau of Engraving and Printing
Dr. Lucy Ella Moten
William Monroe Trotter
Woodrow Wilson’s Cabinet