C.H.J. Taylor and the Rhetoric of Race in Post-Reconstruction America

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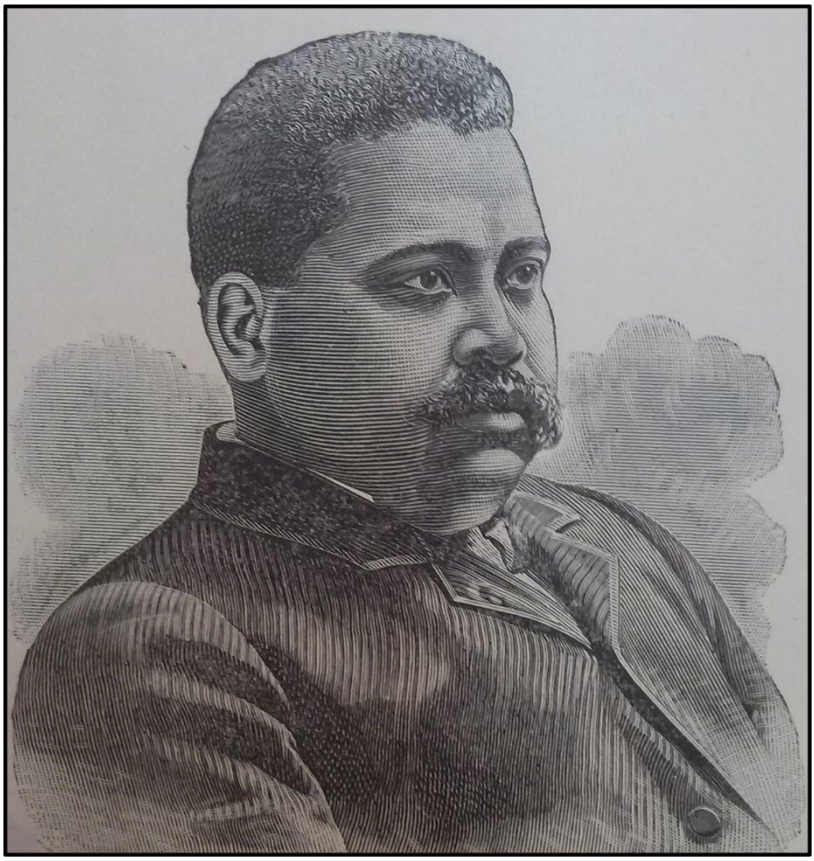

C.H.J. Taylor 1895

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INTRODUCTION

In 1884, a young African American lawyer named C.H.J. Taylor arrived in Wyandotte, Kansas from Missouri and hung out his shingle. Admitted to the Wyandotte County bar, he attached himself to the establishment wing of the county Republican Party, sharing a law office with veteran state legislator and local party boss William B. "Billy" Buchan and joining the Blaine-Logan Club that supported the election of Republican James G. Blaine for President and John A. Logan for Vice-President. The *Wyandotte Chief* newspaper greeted the new arrival with a brief profile, using details provided by Taylor. He was, it said, a "graduate from the scientific and law departments of the Ann Arbor University, of the class of 1878, and has been actively engaged in the practice of his profession since his graduation."[1]

None of this was true. Taylor had not graduated from the University of Michigan nor any other college, university, or even high school. During his journey to Kansas, he had pursued a succession of unremunerative jobs as public speaker, lawyer, schoolteacher, and African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) preacher. His name was not even C.H.J. Taylor. The profile did not mention he was of mixed racial ancestry, born in bondage on an Alabama plantation as Elijah Carson. Contemporary descriptions of his complexion by white journalists ranged from "near white," "yellow," and "light complected," to "dark complexioned," "a ginger cake color," "prune colored," "as black as possible" and "black as a stack of cats," the choice of descriptors typically revealing the racial politics of the writer. He grew up in Savannah, Georgia. There, he hawked newspapers and shined shoes, was largely self-educated, and at age twenty he had been one of the "Redshirt" supporters of Democrat and former Confederate general Wade Hampton in his campaign for governor of South Carolina against a Radical Republican.

These facts did not fit the image of respectability Taylor sought to cultivate in his new surroundings in Kansas. The *Chief* profile is an early example of his gift for self-invention, a practical necessity for a young Black man born

into bondage, with no connections and no advantages beyond burning ambition and a gift for oratory.

In his fifteen-year career, Taylor deployed his oratorical skills to break through many barriers imposed by an increasingly restrictive color line, reinventing himself as he went. As a Republican, he was the first African American elected as a delegate to a Missouri State Republican convention, in 1884. Then, after switching political parties, he was the first Black delegate to a Kansas State Democratic Convention, and, as an alternate, to the national Democratic Convention in St. Louis in 1888, where he was also the first African American to deliver a seconding speech.[2]

Taylor's unprecedented nomination by Democratic President Grover Cleveland as Minister to Bolivia, though ultimately rejected by the Senate, became what one newspaper called "a national issue" revolving around the fraught question of "social equality." With the aid of Frederick Douglass, Taylor then played the major political parties against each other in a successful bid to become Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, one of the highest political offices open to African Americans in the post-Reconstruction era.

As a lawyer, he was the first Black attorney admitted to practice in the U.S. District Court for Western Missouri, and among the first to be admitted to the bar in the United States circuit and district courts in Georgia and in the Fulton County, Georgia Superior Court.[3] Appointed assistant city attorney in Kansas City, Kansas, he was the first African American to hold such a position in that state. Crowds of African Americans in Kansas and Georgia turned up to hear his arguments in court. He allegedly won more than eighty percent of his cases, almost all of which were pleaded before all-white judges and juries. At the time of his death in 1899, he was Dean of Law at Morris Brown College in Atlanta. He died a wealthy man, owning properties in Virginia, Georgia, Maryland, and Kansas.

As a journalist, Taylor edited, at different times, four newspapers for a Black readership in Washington D.C., Atlanta, and Kansas City, Kansas. While editor of the *American Citizen* in Kansas from 1891 to 1894 Taylor wrote brilliantly scalding editorials on race relations and entertaining profiles on

African American entrepreneurs in local communities. He participated vigorously in debates among Black editors and politicians across the country on fundamental issues of civil rights, bringing to those debates his unique voice and perspective.

It was as a political organizer and leader, however, that Taylor made his largest mark. He ran four times for elective office in Kansas – each time, however, was unsuccessful. He helped create and lead the National Negro Democratic League (NNDL) that placed many of its members, including Taylor himself, in high-level government positions and influenced the outcomes of important state and federal elections. He was credited by the *Kansas City Gazette* with contributing to the selection of Democrat Adlai E. Stevenson as Vice-Presidential candidate in the 1892 election. He was also credited, by Black journalist John Edward Bruce ("Bruce Grit"), with playing an essential role in the 1892 election of Democrat Grover Cleveland to a second term as president.[4] Rejecting the Democratic Party's nomination of William Jennings Bryan as its candidate in the election of 1896, Taylor used his influence among Black voters to contribute to the election of Republican William McKinley as president in 1896, in the opinion of the *Washington Post*.[5]

An African American contemporary described Taylor as "a ready talker, a clever parliamentarian" who, at an 1893 conference of Black Democrats, displayed "strong magnetism in controlling the would-be spirits of disruption and keeping all present in line."[6] From organizing a state-wide "Conference of Colored Men" in Kansas in 1886 to devising strategies for resisting the growing trend toward "white primaries" in the Democratic Party during the last year of his life, Taylor sought to increase African American political influence and improve his own political standing. Using the collection of railroad passes he persuaded ticket agents to give him, he traveled tirelessly about the country, building alliances, giving interviews, and delivering speeches. He "worked himself to death in an unequal struggle," wrote a sympathetic African American journalist in an obituary.[7] Said another Black journalist of the time, "He made an enduring place in the history of the nation."[8]

Taylor has been almost forgotten by historians, however: to date there has been only one study of his career as a whole, an article by historian Randall Woods, titled "C.H.J. Taylor and the Movement for Black Political Independence, 1882-1896," published in 1982. Woods writes that Taylor believed that "the key to survival, if not salvation, for the black American was political independence."

Taylor's goal, Woods argues, was to divide the African American vote by drawing enough African Americans away from the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, to comprise an influential pro-Democratic, or at least "independent," voting bloc, thereby putting pressure on both parties to recognize the importance of the Black vote, which held the balance of power in several states, both of the north and of the south. It was, Woods writes, "a stratagem that promised to reduce racism by directly influencing the policies of the two great national parties and indirectly by convincing white Democrats that blacks were not simply political pawns who would submit to Republican manipulation."[9]

Woods deems Taylor's project a "failure." Most prominent African Americans who came over to the Democratic Party ultimately returned to the Republican fold, or withdrew entirely from politics. Nevertheless, the national Black Democratic movement led by Taylor played an important role in stimulating competition among the political parties for the Black vote and creating openings for ambitious freedpersons of Taylor's generation – those he called the "since-the-war Negro" in order to distinguish them from the older, abolitionist generation of Frederick Douglass, John Mercer Langston, and others – to advance politically and economically.[10]

As historian Roger D. Bridges writes, "It was only when blacks began to flirt with the Democratic party that either party moved realistically towards political rights and equality." Taylor was a conspicuous figure in the flirtation; during the later 1880s and throughout the 1890s he was the most influential, controversial, and outspoken Black Democrat in the country.[11]

The movement Taylor led has also received relatively little scholarly attention. The only full-length study of African American Democrats during the period is Lawrence Grossman's *The Democratic Party and the Negro:*

Northern and National Politics 1868-1893 (1976), which focuses primarily on the northern states. Taylor, much of whose career transpired in the South, receives only brief mention. Biographies of his journalistic peers deal mostly with those of Republican or "independent" persuasion, such as John Mitchell Jr. of the *Richmond Planet,* T. Thomas Fortune of the *New York Age,* George L. Knox of the *Indianapolis Freeman,* and John Edward Bruce of the *National Leader.* Biographies of Democrats William T. Scott, of the *Cairo Gazette* and Peter H. Clark of the Cincinnati *Afro-American* are among the few exceptions, although these two lacked the national reputation of Taylor.[12]

C.H.J. Taylor may have escaped scholarly attention, at least in part, because he left behind no personal papers, so a biographer must rely on his published writings in addition to interviews with and articles about him, along with some scattered correspondence and official documents. Taylor was such a controversial figure that most of these sources reveal little that is reliable about his personal beliefs or characteristics. Taylor himself was happy to allow inaccurate descriptions of his history to go uncorrected as long as they redounded to his credit.

Instead, what Taylor's published writings invite us to consider is his place in the racial rhetoric of the crucial decades between the end of Reconstruction and the early twentieth century, a period when the "color line" between white and Black Americans became increasingly rigid and exclusionary. Communication scholars Windy Lawrence *et al* maintain that this period has "generally been discounted or ignored" by scholars, who "treat nearly a quarter-century period as if Blacks were rhetorically silent."[13] Such important studies of African American rhetoric as Mark McPhail's *The Rhetoric of Racism* (1994) and Dexter B. Gordon's *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Nineteenth Century Black Nationalism* (2003) have typically taken a broad historical approach rather than focusing on the rhetoric of a particular period or individual. Study of C.H.J. Taylor's career as rhetorician helps to fill the gap that Lawrence *et al* describe.

Rhetoric was the foundation of Taylor's accomplishments as a political organizer. A white contemporary police court judge M.J. Manning, writing soon after Taylor's death, called him "an orator of the first water" who

"could speak louder, longer and more eloquently than all the talkers of our day white or black."[14] It is a telling appreciation that calls attention to the omnipresence of the color line in much of the discourse of the period. Manning appears to compliment Taylor's oratory while ascribing to it qualities – loudness, length, eloquence – stereotypically and negatively associated with African American speech. The implication of this demeaning "tribute" was that Black speech lacked significance and could be ignored. "Higher" qualities such as moral elevation or truth were reserved for utterances of the white rhetor. It was this kind of devaluing assessment of African American speech that Taylor implicitly alluded to in an 1892 editorial published not long after the Democratic National Convention. Titled, with deliberate irony, "Our Duty," the essay expresses his frustration over barriers the Black rhetor faced in attempting to communicate across the color line:

> It matters not how serious the occasion or how much training the Negro may have received, it is believed by the white man to be the Negro's duty to talk to amuse rather than to instruct. … Our business it would seem is to play monkey or minstrel, to do those things which will emphatically mark us in distinct contradiction from the arrogant Anglo-Saxon race.[15]

Like the nameless narrator addressing white businessmen in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published sixty years later, Taylor's Black rhetor becomes complicit in his humiliation at the hands of whites. Taylor was surely writing from his bitter experience as an orator whose career was founded on a dilemma: advancing in political office required him to curry favor among powerful, often profoundly racist, white Democrats like Alabama Senator John T. Morgan, while maintaining influence among an African American constituency that continued to regard the Democratic Party as the party of slavery required his speaking out against growing white supremacism.

Taylor aspired to be heard by white as well as Black audiences, and to be acknowledged as a mediator between what he called the "civilized" members of both races. He used his rhetorical skills to try to persuade Black and white elites that they had common interests that transcended the color line. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, with racial segregation dominant, this strategy became increasingly untenable, much to Taylor's despair. Nevertheless, he remains an important contributor to the struggle

of a unique generation of ambitious, upward bound African Americans – born in slavery, raised during the Civil War and Reconstruction, and coming to maturity in the face of resurgent white nationalism – for a secure place in a society seemingly bent on their permanent exclusion.

CHAPTER ONE

MIGRATIONS 1856-1883

"As citizens we should enter the common field of rivalry for national and state laurels living and being governed by the broad law governing all citizens in this country."
—C.H.J. Taylor 1883

C.H.J. Taylor's career as an orator began with selling newspapers on the streets of Savannah, Georgia. He came to the city from rural Perry County, Alabama, where he was born into slavery as Elijah Carson on a plantation outside of the county seat, Marion, "within fourteen feet of a cotton stalk," he once said.[1] Most accounts agree he was born in 1856, a year that saw the birth of three other significant Black leaders with whom Taylor would cross paths: educator Booker T. Washington and journalists T. Thomas Fortune and John Edward Bruce ("Bruce Grit").

Contemporary accounts agree Taylor's father was named Rufus Carson but differ over whether Carson was the white owner of the plantation on which Taylor was born or a slave there.[2] One of the most comprehensive accounts of Taylor's early life, published in 1898, identified Rufus as a slave, but the entire account, laconically described by the editors of the *Kansas City Journal* as "somewhat inaccurate," had many exaggerations and fabrications.

In this story, the enslaved Rufus Carson, "after the custom of the Southern plantations," was a polygamist, and Elijah's mother a slave on an adjoining plantation. After emancipation, Rufus discarded the boy's mother for another woman. Over Elijah's protests, he took the boy with him to his "little log cabin in the midst of the vast cotton fields and put him to work." Taylor's stepmother was "exceedingly cruel to him," and he was forced to toil in the cotton fields, "half-fed and less than half-clad, bending down the tall stalks that were much higher than his head."[3]

Taylor's view of his identity and future may have been shaped by changes in race relations in Perry County during Reconstruction. The county, on the western side of mid-Alabama's "black belt" and among its poorest, was spared many of the hardships the Civil War inflicted on other parts of the state. Though Marion was briefly occupied by Union troops, the county saw little combat.

After the war, Perry County became what historian Bertis English has called an "anomaly" for its unusual degree of "biracial cooperation and mutual uplift." A few freedpeople were elected or appointed to political office during Reconstruction; at least one went as a delegate to a state Democratic convention in 1867. These achievements may have stirred young Taylor's ambition as signs of what was possible. Freedpeople in Marion worked with whites and the American Missionary Association to establish a school for Black children. Some white landowners in the county were willing to sell small homesteads to ex-slaves, unlike most landowners in other Black Belt counties.[4]

As a youth, therefore, Taylor was present to witness the transition from the oppressive paternalism of the master-slave relationship to a more transactional landlord-laborer or buyer-seller relationship of the kind sociologist Peggy Hargis describes on a post-war plantation in Georgia. There, the transition to freedom, as Hargis describes it, "forced a renegotiation of Blacks' 'proper place.'" White plantation owners had to cultivate relationships with freedpeople based on mutual interests rather than coercion, while the latter could cultivate an advantageous relationship with "a benevolent patron."[5] Segregationism – the "color line" – had yet to dictate and rigidify social relations and racial identity.

More important than where he was born or his parentage in determining what Taylor would become, however, was his capacity for self-invention. At age twelve or thirteen, the 1898 account alleges, Elijah fled the Alabama cotton fields for Savannah, a journey of over four hundred miles, "ragged and without a cent." Perhaps fearing his father would find him and take him back to the cabin in Alabama, or to firmly put his past of bondage behind him, he changed his name to the more resonant Charles Henry James Taylor. He made little mention of his personal experience of slavery in later years.

Some accounts have him going to Savannah with members of his family, although he once told a reporter that it was his white master who took him there.[6] The 1884 Savannah city directory lists Rufus Carson as an African American truck farmer living in the city's Eastville district. In the 1895 directory he was living with Sarah, a vegetable seller, and Taylor's sister, Annie E. Carson, though by that date Elijah, or "Charley Carson" as a Savannah paper insisted he was known, had long since left the city.[7]

One can only speculate that his experience growing up in Perry County contributed to the brash self-confidence Taylor took with him when he migrated to Savannah, where freedpeople and whites often lived in proximity. Residential boundaries separating the races were "porous," according to historian Adele Oltman, even as segregation began taking hold in public facilities.[8] In 1872, while Taylor was living in the city, Black Savannahians blocked a measure to impose segregation on the city's streetcar system; their protests resulted in the death of three freedpeople.[9] The color line that Taylor knew at the time, at least that between educated freedpeople and the white elite, seemed negotiable. The experience of relatively amicable, if undoubtedly patronizing, attitudes of members of the former slaveholding elite toward freedpeople may help explain the air of self-confident familiarity Taylor often adopted toward upper class whites in later life.

One story, reprinted in newspapers across the country after he became nationally known, typifies this attitude. Taylor was said to have been standing at the "Junction," a busy intersection in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, talking with an elderly white Southerner and former enslaver, who remarked, "Now, Taylor, I am glad to see you on the right side politically. I do like to see a Democratic nigger. I beg your pardon, I mean colored man." "That's all right, Mr. H.," Taylor replied. "You just say 'nigger,' for when you say it I know you mean colored man, and when you say colored man I know you mean 'nigger.'"[10] The story, factual or not, illustrates the insouciance toward upper class whites that made Taylor so objectionable to many of them.

The young Taylor secured a job as a newsboy for the Savannah *Morning News.* He was, the paper recalled in 1887, "the most successful of all

newsboys. He sold more papers than any other boy, running as high as 175 to 200 a day," an early indication of his persuasive skills.[11] One story said he had been an office boy in a Savannah commission house, another a bootblack. Given his ambition and energy, he could have been all three.

Accounts also differ as to how the young man was educated while in Savannah. Some have him gaining an education solely "by his own exertion."[12] One narrative describes Taylor taking lessons from a private tutor and attending Beach Institute, a free public school founded by the American Missionary Association and for many years the only public high school for African Americans in the city.[13] It attracted, writes historian Willard Gatewood, "black upper-class children from the surrounding area and was accused on occasion of discriminating against children of darker complexion."[14] A story in the *Washington Post* said Taylor "soon learned more than the public schools could teach him."[15] Taylor himself told the *Atlanta Constitution* that he had acquired his education through a "considerable number of personal hard licks from my own toiling hands."

The *Atlanta Constitution* story reported that Alabama U.S. Senator James Pugh aided Taylor in getting an education, probably his first high-level patron if so – although, in a later *Constitution* story, Taylor denied Pugh's role. Pugh, a former enslaver, later introduced him to Grover Cleveland.[16] Taylor's family evidently promoted his education since both he and sister Annie acquired learning, Annie's sufficient for her to become a teacher at an African American school in Savannah. Nevertheless, opportunities for education were limited for freedmen in Georgia so, in 1875 or 1876, Taylor headed north in search of a higher education.

The year 1876 saw one of the most contentious presidential elections in U.S. history, when Republicans agreed to withdraw federal troops from the South in exchange for Democrats conceding the presidency to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes. The contest between Hayes and Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden had a counterpart in South Carolina, where ex-Confederate general Wade Hampton, a Democrat, challenged Radical Republican Governor Daniel H. Chamberlain. Taylor detoured from his journey north to give speeches for Tilden and Hampton, saying later he was "almost mobbed" by enraged Black Republicans at one speech and shot in the leg at

another.[17] Yet the twenty-year old Taylor, apparently already an effective orator, was said to have won "considerable numbers" of African American votes for Hampton.[18] He was considered valuable enough that Hampton, then a U.S. Senator, joined James Pugh in introducing him to Grover Cleveland a decade later. Hampton also supported Taylor's unsuccessful bid for a Justice of the Peace position in Washington, D.C. in 1888, and later still secured Taylor a job as a traveling agent for a Black normal school in Virginia.

The South Carolina detour was a critical moment in the development of Taylor's views on race and identity. Hampton was the kind of white, Southern aristocrat he was familiar with, the kind he believed could be reasoned with. Hampton's promises during the election were, writes historian Rod Andrew Jr., "paternalistic ones of protection and provision. Hampton gave assurances to African Americans like those a powerful patron might make to his clients."[19]

Many Black South Carolinians perceived Northerners like Chamberlain as outsiders. T. Thomas Fortune, another Southern-born Black leader, had what historian Susan Carle calls "a deep suspicion of carpetbaggers from the North, whom he saw duping Freedpeople while claiming to be their friends."[20] Years later, Taylor decried them as "despicable political tramps" who called on the freedpeople to "Fall down and worship us …. How faithfully the black voters worshipped is well remembered. Who can forget their Moses of South Carolina and their Chamberlain."[21]

"Building on such distrust and other shared perceptions," writes historian Edmund L. Drago, "Wade Hampton and his lieutenants were able to recruit black Red Shirts."[22] In his speeches, Taylor probably dwelled on the image of Chamberlain as a Yankee interloper. His real motives for supporting Hampton were more self-serving and could not have been safely put in a stump speech before a potentially hostile Black crowd. He supported Hampton, he would say in 1888, "not so much because I admired Hampton as because I believed that Chamberlain, by pushing forward the ignorant negroes and keeping the more intelligent colored men in the back ground, was doing us incalculable harm."[23] To Taylor, Chamberlain was bypassing men like himself: ambitious, literate freedmen who constituted what historian

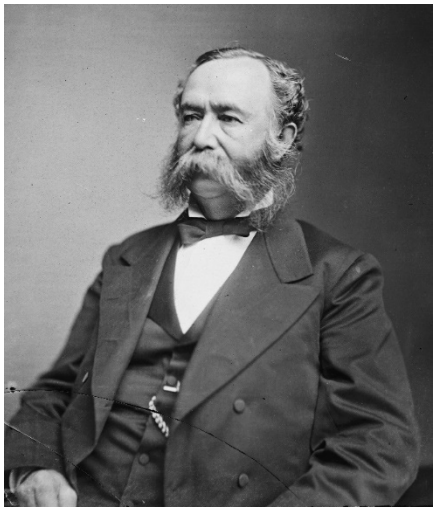

Fig. 1.1. Wade Hampton

Fig. 1.2. Martin Delany

Martin Kilson has called "the first generation of black Americans who acquired middle class attributes during the South's Reconstruction period."[24] Instead, Radical Republicans like Chamberlain were, as Taylor saw it, favoring uneducated freedpeople for political office with the purpose of using them to retain Republican control in the South. As Taylor later wrote, "A colored man, who by hard study and work was, in every particular, fit to represent the people," a man like himself, in short, "would never be selected by them. He would want to stop and read "measures" presented before voting for them; sometime he would disagree with the leaders, and balk their plans; hence it was a part of their duty to see to it, that the intelligent, representative Negroes were kept out of office."[25] Hampton, in contrast to Chamberlain, believed suffrage should be based on property and education, and that government, as historian Nell Irvin Painter writes, "rightly belonged in the hands of the wealth and intelligence of the South." This view, says Painter, "was gaining acceptance among many southerners, including some of the black elite" such as veteran abolitionist Martin R. Delany of South Carolina, who was one of Hampton's supporters. Delany believed that "men of the better classes" – white and Black – could "end the violence and bring back prosperity."[26] To Delany, writes Philip Foner, the end of Reconstruction meant that "Utopian hopes for a permanent change in Southern life… should be abandoned; property would eventually rule in South Carolina as it did elsewhere, and blacks should strike a deal with leading whites while they still retained significant bargaining power."[27]

There is no evidence to suggest that Taylor knew Delany personally, but he may well have read Delany's *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color, with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization* (1879), if not other of Delany's works. In 1897, he was reported to have a biography of Delany in his library.[28] Significant parallels can be found between Taylor's and Delany's views on meritocracy and the nature of race. In 1888, Taylor would argue for a political alliance between the Black intelligentsia and the Southern white elite, not excluding former enslavers, on the basis of what he believed were shared, meritocratic values that he summarized as "coin, culture, and character." The question, Taylor asked, "is whether wealth and intelligence shall rule or ignorance and poverty."[29]

Delany may also have influenced Taylor's belief that the color line was premised on the false belief that the races were biologically distinct. In *Principia of Ethnology*, Delany argued for "monogenesis**,"** the belief that all humans descended from the same ancestor. Echoes of *Principia* can be detected in the opening statement of a manifesto Taylor regularly printed in the early 1890s in his Kansas newspaper *The American Citizen:* "We believe," it begins, "in the unity of the human race, which race has been divided into a number of distinct classes, by climate, custom and hereditary cause."[30]

The "distinct classes" in Taylor's manifesto correspond to what historian Mia Bay describes as Delany's "unambiguous argument" in the *Principia* "for the existence of permanent distinctions between the races," distinctions that were cultural and historical rather than biological.[31] In Delany's formulation, as summarized by historian Tunde Adeleke, society was "an area of conflict between two opposing forces … the domineering and 'devilish' whites and the oppressed and timid blacks." Delany, Adeleke continues, "publicly and unambiguously declared his racial/ethnic loyalty. His identity with his race was unequivocal and total. He once informed a racially mixed audience in Rochester, New York in 1862 that his concern was for "the pure black, uncorrupted by Caucasian blood."[32] Though himself of "mixed" racial ancestry, Taylor sometimes made a similar defense of racial "purity," once telling a Topeka audience "If I had my way about it, I would have every one of you black as the ace of spades."[33]

After the election in South Carolina, Taylor resumed his journey north, landing first at Oberlin College in Ohio. The college offered a liberal arts education to many African American students from the South; former U.S. Senator Blanche K. Bruce and Black abolitionist and prominent Washington attorney John Mercer Langston were among its distinguished graduates.[34] It was frequently alleged in newspaper accounts that Taylor graduated from Oberlin, but his name appears nowhere in the college's list of graduates, making it likely he only sat in on classes, as had James Milton Turner of Missouri, Taylor's future political ally. According to Gary Kremer, his biographer, Turner attended Oberlin but never paid a bill there, and probably was given room and board by a professor, "as was customary at the time."[35] The same may have been true of Taylor.

An indignant but unnamed Oberlin graduate wrote to the *Cleveland Gazette* in 1887 that Taylor had indeed been an Oberlin student at one time, perhaps supported by the College's "manual labor with study" program, but that he could not have graduated since, the writer archly claimed, no Black graduate of Oberlin had ever become a Democrat.[36] Nevertheless, Taylor continued to feed the story he was an Oberlin graduate, since educational credentials were an important status symbol for members of Taylor's cohort, many of whom had perforce cobbled together an education from whatever opportunities presented themselves. As Willard Gatewood has pointed out, educational achievement among African Americans was rare: fewer than 2,500 Black men and women earned college degrees between 1826 and 1900. The great majority of these would have come from among what Gatewood calls the Colored Aristocracy, "the sons and daughters of caterers, barbers, tailors, teachers, government employees, and others of high-status occupations," often generations from slavery, not those like Taylor, born in slavery and largely self-educated.[37]

Accounts of Taylor's connections with the University of Michigan were also exaggerated, if not entirely invented. According to the 1898 story, he graduated from the University as a law student in 1878, receiving his diploma "with the highest recommendations from his preceptors." This appears to be fiction, promoted by Taylor or his partisans. An 1889 profile says he studied in the "literary department" at the University for three years before turning to law, and that he "completed the prescribed course of two years."[38]

In his encyclopedic study of Black lawyers, J. Clay Smith argues on the basis of university records that Taylor neither graduated from, nor perhaps even attended, in whatever fashion, the University of Michigan's law school.[39] His name does not appear on the University's graduation records. He may, again, have only sat in on classes, but did nothing to discourage and, in fact, did much to promote the impression that he had graduated with distinction.[40]

The hagiographic account of 1898 continues by summarizing Taylor's political rise before introducing what the writer calls "one of the most pathetic episodes in his wonderful career." Taylor, now nationally

prominent, allegedly re-established contact with his father, who "had never known any better life than the hardships and privations of the cabin in the cottonfields down in Alabama," and moved him to a farm his wealthy son had purchased in the District of Columbia. The father is "still living, hale and hearty, while his distinguished son is one of the greatest leaders of his race."[41] No mention is made in this account of Taylor's mother or stepmother, though elsewhere Taylor praised his mother's African roots, once telling an interviewer that he was "proud of the fact that a black woman was my mother," and claiming in an 1895 account that she was "a native African, the daughter of an African chief."[42]

Many statements in the 1898 account are inaccurate or in conflict with other stories, although what might seem its most unlikely revelation, that of Taylor's triumphant settlement of his father on a farm, gains credibility from the testimony of one Jordan Carson, who claimed to be Taylor's third cousin. He said that, as a slave, he had been in a coffle of slaves traveling from North Carolina to Perry County, Alabama. Among the slaves, he said, was Rufus Carson, who had since become "one of the rich colored men of Washington."[43] Taylor himself never mentioned this story publicly.

The many variations in reports of Taylor's early life reflect both his character and the rapidly changing society in which he lived. Conditions for young, educated African Americans were ever more uncertain and unstable in the post-Reconstruction era. It was not only whites, Northern and Southern, who could not accept the idea of the freedpeople's bid for equality; educated African Americans, generations away from slavery, found Taylor's manner – that is, his boastfulness and blithe self-confidence - offensive. Even if he had wanted to adhere strictly to the truth, he was a political figure in a highly partisan time, and his antagonists, white and Black, were as willing to make up or exaggerate stories to undo him as were his partisans to do the same with stories in his favor.

Later in his career, Taylor's educational credentials would be mocked by John Mercer Langston in the course of a dispute between the two men, after Taylor had become a Cleveland Democrat. Unlike Taylor, Langston as a student had benefited from his white father's aid; his father was a wealthy Virginian planter who provided him with a portion of his estate. He

graduated from Oberlin, became a lawyer, and married a white woman. Langston haughtily suggested the importance of distinguishing between himself, "a Negro who has been educated as I have at Oberlin College, Ohio, soundly in politics as well as morally," and Taylor, who was regarded by Republicans like Langston as an upstart "Democrat for revenue only."[44] It was a slight Taylor neither forgot nor forgave; he would eventually use the same accusation of political opportunism against Langston.

From 1880 to 1884, Taylor migrated across Eastern and Midwestern states, from West Virginia, where he taught school, to Kentucky, where he was principal of a Black school in Hartford, Kentucky, and to Indiana, where he began practicing law.[45] An 1887 story says that he won recognition for ably defending a white man charged with murder.[46] In 1882, he was admitted to practice in the superior and criminal courts of Marion County, Indiana, and was appointed Deputy District Attorney of the Nineteenth Judicial District of Indiana.[47]

Neither lawyering nor school teaching provided a good living, nor the authority and social status Taylor sought. Despite successes in the courtroom, he could never expect to get really remunerative cases. So, resuming the restless movement that characterized his life, he continued traveling west, lawyering, teaching school, and building a reputation as a public speaker. By 1883, he was giving speeches to mixed Black and white audiences at churches in small towns like Monmouth, Illinois, and Ottumwa and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on religious topics such as "Monotheism, Polytheism, and Pantheism at War," or "Hell in a Blaze," as well as political ones, including "What we Are and What we Will Be," and "The Colored Man as Related to the South."[48] In his presentation of the latter topic, the Iowa organizers promised Taylor would be accompanied by "three native Alabamans," presumably whites, "who will sing some genuine darkey melodies."[49] No detailed information on these speeches was printed in local newspapers, but this unabashed appeal to southern stereotypes was clearly intended to draw a white audience. While honing his oratorical skills, Taylor was also developing a social network to draw on in future years among Black members of the United Order of Odd Fellows and AME churches.[50] Somewhere in his travels, he was ordained an AME preacher.

By 1882, Taylor had reached Palmyra, Missouri, where he, again, headed a Black school, and ventured into politics for the first time. He had acquired enough of a reputation as an orator to be hired by John Brooks, head of the Missouri Prohibition Alliance, to promote prohibition among Black voters in Missouri. Though he once claimed to be President of the "Temperance Alliance" of Missouri, there is no evidence Taylor did anything to aid the cause. He may have taken it on because it put his name in the news, and because belonging to a temperance organization was, as Nell Irvin Painter has written, "a clear signal of respectability…."[51] For most of his career, Taylor opposed prohibition, though claiming to be himself a teetotaler.[52] In an 1891 speech in Cedar Rapids, Iowa before the Negro Anti-Prohibition Convention, he called prohibition a "delusion and a snare … which substitutes for each saloon it closes an army of perjurers and for each drunkard it reforms, it makes one hundred sneaks and dissemblers."[53] Campaigning in Iowa for an anti-prohibition gubernatorial candidate, he predicted that "The disposition to legislate on the appetites of people is fast disappearing."[54]

In 1883, while Taylor was still in Missouri, the Supreme Court in the so-called "Civil Rights Cases" invalidated key portions of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that sought to guarantee African Americans equal treatment in public facilities such as restaurants and public transportation. It was the first major blow against key legislation of the Reconstruction era. African Americans held "Indignation meetings" across the country in protest; in Chicago they called for a general strike. Frederick Douglass called the ruling "a step backward" and "a concession to a prejudice" that belonged to "an extinct institution and places." He also said it was a "surrender of the main result of the war."[55]

In response to the decision, and to the protests against it, Taylor wrote a letter to a white-owned pro-Democratic paper, the *Herald* of Marion County, Missouri. The printed excerpt deserves attention since it gives a first glimpse into Taylor's rhetorical style and contrarian strategies. Though he appears to be addressing Black readers, his intended readers would have been largely, if not entirely, white. Wanting to make an agreeable impression on that audience, he began the letter by drawing a line separating himself from those holding "indignation meetings," a strategy he would use throughout his career. Educated African Americans, he writes, "should be

too proud to ask [for] any legislation by congress… to secure to them more social rights than that guaranteed in the right to be a citizen in the United States." The protestors, by implication, were letting down their race by demanding legislation which favored themselves.

Taylor deploys common rhetorical devices, not unlike those which an AME preacher might use in a sermon, for emphasis: anaphora ("We want no class legislation, we want no public benefits that other citizens cannot enjoy") and metaphor ("As citizens we should enter the common field of rivalry for national and state laurels…"). He casts himself as spokesman for middle class Black citizens who are "too proud" to want "class legislation." The letter ends with Taylor repeatedly expressing his disagreement with the views of the protestors: "The supreme court has done nothing to lower the black man in the least;" "I do not understand the colored man to be any worse off…;" "I cannot see how that decision has affected the colored man in the least." Taylor's effusive effort to distance himself from Black protestors earned him the condescending approval of the paper's white editors, who printed it under the title "His Head is Level," and described his opinions as "sensible" - sentiments premised on the racist assumption that such traits were uncharacteristic of African Americans.

Taylor's rhetorical strategy worked: it earned him election as a delegate from Marion County, Missouri, to the 1884 Republican state Convention in Sedalia, Missouri, kicking off his fifteen-year political career. His color line-crossing presence brought forth sarcastic remarks from the Democratic *Palmyra Spectator* on the racially "mixed" nature of the county convention that nominated Taylor. The "'man and brother,'" said the paper in the conventionally patronizing way of referring to African American men, "came in for a share."[56] Taylor's reception at the convention was unfriendly; a Sedalia, Missouri, paper observed that the "summary manner" in which Taylor – the paper mistakenly calls him C.H. Tandy – was "squelched" would only further rouse discontent among Black voters, who were already frustrated by the lack of political offices open to them.[57] Worse abuse would soon come Taylor's way, but he had gained attention, becoming the first African American delegate to a Missouri Republican convention.