

*Middle-class African-Americans in New Bern North Carolina owned and operated the Star of Zion at the time of the 1900 election. The newspaper was established and supported by two prominent African-American community leaders, Charles Pettey, a minister, and John Dancy, a businessman and politician. These editorials, probably written by J.W. Smith, the newspaper's editor at the time, voice the concerns of a certain segment of the African-American population. "Broken Pledges" appeared just before the vote on the constitutional amendment. "A Prophecy and Warning" appeared a few days after the election.*

## **Broken Pledges**

**The Star of Zion, July 26, 1900**

The Democratic party of North Carolina is leaving no stone unturned to carry the amendment which will disfranchise the majority of Negro voters. We cannot see how any Democratic leader of North Carolina can go to the ballot box on August 2, the day of election, and vote to disfranchise the Negro voters without having manifest chagrin, deep mortification and almost winking of his eyes out of countenance. In the last campaign in this State, when the Republicans and Populists charged that if the Democrats came into power they would attempt to pass a disfranchising amendment nearly every Democratic paper and speaker in the State quickly branded the charge as a lie, and in the second political handbook they issued they said the Democratic convention would spit on any man who would make such a proposition. The following is the language clipped from the Democratic handbook:

If even the Democrats should succeed and should have control of the legislature they would be powerless to disfranchise anybody. The Constitution forbids it. The Constitution gives the right of suffrage to all male persons over 21 years of age not disqualified by crime, and the legislature cannot add or take away a letter from that. That can only be done by the people themselves, and the Democrats will never submit any proposition to the people to take from a man his right to vote. No Democrat has ever proposed such a thing. The charge is only intended to mislead, to deceive, and to make political capital. It is entirely false....There is not a Democratic candidate for office who would not pledge himself most solemnly against it.

Well, the disfranchising amendment was framed by the legislature, and is before the people, and the authors of it have not been spit upon. This shows that the memory of the Democratic party is badly out of repair, and for this reason the amendment should be defeated by an overwhelming majority.

Seeing that the Negroes were still suspicious of Democratic denials, Mr. Simmons, the State Chairman of the Democratic party, on December 27, 1898, in order to wipe out all suspicions, issued the following ultimatum:

For the past twenty years or more just before every election, the Republican speakers, at their midnight meetings have been in the habit of telling the Negro if the Democrats came into power their right to vote would be taken away from them.

First, they told them if the Democrats got the State government they would disfranchise them. Then they told them if the Democrats elected a President they would disfranchise them. The Democrats elected a President and they did not disfranchise them. Then they told them if the Democrats got control of

Congress they would disfranchise them. The Democrats got control of Congress and did not disfranchise them.

All along the honest white men of the State laughed at these lies, and marveled that the Negro did not have sense enough to see that he was duped. Finally the Negro himself began to see through the trick. He had seen the Democrats in full power in the State for twenty-two years, and had learned through experience that that party did not propose to disfranchise him, and he, too, began to laugh at these lies, and finally refused to be frightened by their rot any longer. So the old Republican scarecrow had to be hauled down and put away.

They know that the Democratic party has always stood for manhood suffrage, and they know that the Democratic party will never, under any circumstances under the sun, consent to the passage of any law which will take from them, however poor and ignorant they may be, the right to vote, or which will in any way diminish or lessen that great privilege.

Beg pardon, Mr. Simmons, but were your address of 1898 a slip of the brain? We ask this because you are marshaling the Democratic host from the mountain to the sea to do the very thing that you in 1898 said it under no circumstance under the sun would do – disfranchise the Negroes; no matter how poor and ignorant they may be. It is this broken promise that makes the illiterate white men believe that they or their children will be disfranchised after 1908 if they can not read or write, and therefore scores of them, will either vote against it or not vote at all. They feel if you will fool the illiterate Negroes that you will fool them also. May the amendment meet with a Waterloo either at the ballot box or at the hands of the Supreme Court.

### **A Prophecy and Warning** **Star of Zion, August 9, 1900**

Although the Democratic party of North Carolina last Thursday disfranchised the illiterate black voters by an overwhelming majority, some of its leaders feel that the results do not justify the party going into wild ecstasies and shouting its socks off. In the *Charlotte Observer* of last Sabbath, "Trojan," (Rev. J.C. Troy,) an able and versatile writer and editor, and a prominent and braiy young white divine of the M.E. Church, South, hit the bull's eye of common sense when he fired off the following words of warning and caution:

One thing is certain, the vote yesterday does not insure the perpetuity of the Democratic party in the matter of holding the reins of government. It will now be held to stricter accountability than ever before in its history. Let us not forget that hundreds of votes were cast by men not calling themselves Democrats. The Negro has now been eliminated. What next? General Grant used to say that when the Republican party acted the rascal the Democratic party acted the fool.

Yes, and Henry Clay said, "I would rather be right than President." No law which is unjust, unreasonable and discriminating will insure the perpetuity of any political party in the matter of holding the reins of government. Giving the suffrage only to those who can read and write, and then qualifying this restriction so that it can apply in practice only to black voters, is decidedly unjust and discriminating and in direct opposition to the fifteenth amendment which says,

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be *denied* or *abridged* by the United States, or by *any State*, on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Had the amendment just adopted by North Carolina applied to all classes of voters indiscriminately, it would have been constitutional, but to disfranchise the illiterate black voter and not the illiterate white voter – well, if the Supreme Court does not declare this interference with law and justice unconstitutional, does not stand by the fifteenth amendment which is being trodden under heels, condemned and detested, then thousands of citizens will lose faith and respect in the justness of that court.

We repeat, that had the amendment applied to all classes of illiterate voters alike, it would have been constitutional. All fair-minded progressive people believe in qualified suffrage. Intelligence and moral integrity lie at the very foundation of sovereign power which resides in the community. Those who vote, determine who shall make, who shall interpret, and who shall execute our laws. Ignorance on the part of a large and increasing body of voters imperils the very foundation of our civil and religious liberty. A vote should represent intelligent apprehension of the principles upon which our government, State or national, rests; and it should represent conscientious adherence to the principles which a man believes to be for the good of the State or nation and the social and political health of the community.

Some of the Northern States, mostly in New England, have for years had a qualifying suffrage which is indiscriminate. In those States, no man, white or black, can vote who cannot read and write. It is a stimulant to education, because the white and black voters are qualifying themselves by going to night schools at least and getting an education. The same good result would have come to the illiterate voters of both races in North Carolina had the amendment applied to all alike; but to disfranchise the uneducated Negro and say to him, “You must learn to read and write before you can vote again,” and to the uneducated white man, “You can vote whether you learn to read and write or not,” is unfair, because it is class legislation. The Democrats have disposed of the fox, but are they sure they have caught the hare? If the Supreme Court should declare the amendment constitutional, it will not discourage the Negro, for if illiteracy is the big stone rolled at the mouth of his political sepulchre, the educated Negroes will soon roll it away by teaching him day and night, and weeping Justice, in trumpet tones, will command the black Lazarus to come forth, crying, “Loose him and let him go.”